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Marina E. Laprade

Bard College, ml4055@bard.edu

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Recommended Citation

Laprade, Marina E., "Youtube: Theater for Gen Z's Hyperreality" (2020). *Senior Projects Spring 2020*. 161.
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Youtube: Theater for Gen Z's Hyperreality

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Art of Bard College

by
Marina Laprade

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2020

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Susan and to everyone else who supported me while writing this.

Thank you Cayce Pollard and your jetlagged mirror world.

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Introduction

Thesis

This project analyzes how Generation Z and their penchant for truth has transformed entertainment culture to create new economies and systems which reward those who simulate everyday life. Youtube, Gen Z's preferred social media site, has been home to many of today's untraditional and self-made celebrity figures. Because the video platform is a host for primarily amateur creators who upload personal found footage, the unposed and candid nature of content on the site caters to Gen Z, who in their distrust for corporate media have mistakenly equated homemade aesthetics for authenticity. This essay will focus on two young and highly accomplished Youtube vloggers, David Dobrik and Jake Paul and how they use the mundane, everyday world as the base material for their performed spectacle. As the Youtuber Dan Olson has suggested, their vlogs have created what many have called a "*hyperreality*."¹ A hyperreality can be understood as an augmented and ideal version of one's self and life. It is achieved through a carefully calculated performance despite its primary goal of persuading viewers to believe otherwise. And although the performance straddles the boundary between the authentic and the artificial, it has become the archetypal model for success in the new, burgeoning influencer economy. And so in such pursuit of the truth, we've only created a system that rewards those who simulate it.

Celebrities and influencers represent the value of visibility and how power is organized in the world. Public figures such as influencers and celebrities articulate how we develop our own

¹ *Vlogs and the Hyperreal*. Youtube, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSnktB2N2sQ&t=328s>.

sense of identity and belonging, how we define our successes and failures, and where our achievements and aspirations lie. Public figures have always been used as a point of reference to which we compare ourselves, whether it's in hatred and rejection. As Emily Dean Hund points out, contemporary means of image production means that we no longer just casually observe these figures from afar.² These new influencer figures are our friends, neighbors, and mutuals. It doesn't matter if we ourselves have 200 followers on a private account or 12,000 on a public account, because with every photo or video we post, we are directly partaking of and consuming the same algorithms that have made our new celebrity influencers so famous. Self-branding and the curatorial process it entails no longer the affair of media personalities, but is a widespread process affecting people en masse all across the world.

This project will focus on why and how two vloggers have been so successful in making vlogging their full time careers by calibrating their performance to function and appeal to a generation's cultural gravitation towards authenticity. But despite the emphasis on authenticity, as we will see in the vlogs of David Dobrik and Jake Paul, vloggers use tactics that reveal them to be entertainers who only simulate the authenticity of everyday life. Dobrik and Paul create their hyperreality by seamlessly incorporating outlandish pranks and stunts into diary-like videos while remaining as "real" as possible through an interactive and dedicated relationship with their fanbase. Both vloggers must balance their identities of being intimate and relatable with their role of maintaining a spectacle as an entertainer. Their identities seem split and contradictory. Although they seem like trustworthy equals with their middle class suburban backgrounds, they also embody an aspirational element for viewers by showcasing wealth and in their videos. They

² Hund, Emily Dean. "The Influencer Industry: Constructing And Commodifying Authenticity On Social Media." ScholarlyCommons. Accessed May 4, 2020. <https://repository.upenn.edu/edissertations/3636/>.

embody the new American Dream where fame, fortune, and social mobility are achieved by creating a marketable hyperreality for the influencer economy. The influencer economy, in which ordinary people are able to monetize their own version of everyday life, has created mass incentive for online hyperrealism to become even more augmented. It has spurred a culture of incessant clickbait in which people find success by capitalizing on their own fabricated version of reality by way of hoax, exaggeration, and flat out deception. Are we delusional or desperate?

In my introduction I will describe who the influencer is and why this self-made celebrity figure is so popular today in comparison to traditional celebrity figures. By considering the social context of Gen Z's era of information overload, we will see how the generation of "digital natives" came to regard "authenticity" as their most prized value. While the idea of authenticity is not new, we will explore how it translates into the visual culture of Gen Z's world online through a candid social media presence that eschews any form of appearing manufactured. And although the influencer represents a sense of unbridled honesty to create an intimate relationship with their viewers, the social bond has been co-opted by larger companies looking to profit off the influencer's aura of authenticity. In turn, the influencer who once stood for honesty, is now incentivized by brand deals and sponsorships. As life continues to migrate online, Gen Z's main space for creative expression is being hijacked by larger companies looking to exploit both their content and their viewers. However, a fabricated sense of authenticity is not only played out by popular influencers incentivized by the prospects of wealth. It trickles down to every last person with a social media account. As our lives online become more active than our "real" ones, I present the idea of the hyperreal, in which we can no longer tell reality apart from its representation. Vloggers are simply extreme examples of a widespread avatar phenomenon, in

which everyday people become augmented characters performing in their digital, fictional narratives.

In Chapter One, I will give a brief history of the vlog and Youtube's development to understand why amateurism is equated with authenticity. I explain how Youtube was born from Web 2.0 when the internet had changed to become user friendly for non-tech people. The internet's participatory culture is often attributed to Web 2.0, as this was when big social media platforms like Facebook, Myspace, and Youtube were created. The internet was once filled with cyber-utopian optimism in which autonomous individuals could interact with one another without any larger, intervening powers. Youtube itself only transformed into the video hosting website itself after the users had begun to use what was originally a dating platform for their own means. I give a couple examples of some of Youtube's first videos and how the platform evolved to resemble an encyclopedic video archive. I also present two underground communities of amateur video makers who made similar montage content prior to Youtube's creation. These two communities serve as an example of what a legitimate peer-to-peer network might look like in comparison to Youtube's current interference that algorithmically organizes video in hopes of more profit. Not only does Youtube interfere with its own organization system, but it is actively bringing in celebrity names so that it can be an established video streaming like Netflix or Hulu. Youtube is now inhabited by two opposing factions-- the original amateur content creators and the celebrity-turned-vloggers that Youtube has brought on.

I will analyze elements of David Dobrik's vlog to understand what effect both his video's formal properties and its content have on his prominently Gen Z viewers in Chapter Two. We will investigate how David crafts the effect of authenticity through two main operations-- using

the everyday as his backdrop and cultivating a sense of inclusion and intimacy for his viewers. David's vlog functions like a diary into which he invites viewers, making them laugh and experience all the emotions as depicted by his friend group. While David includes segments of pranks, oddities, and stunts, the main focus remains on filming his friend's reactions which is augmented by the vlog's choice of being filmed consistently in a POV shot. It is clear that David cultivates a sense of authenticity through building a relationship with his viewers. Not only do his fans play a recurring character in his vlog but he is constantly giving money and prizes away to them. However, despite the intimate bond that David creates with his viewers, we will question whether David is just an ordinary person making amateur videos, or if he might actually be a professional entertainer. We look at his brand deals and sponsorships and investigate whether these companies may play a role in his vlog's intentions.

In Chapter Three, I will look at Jake Paul's vlog and examine how he crafts authenticity and an intimate relationship with his viewers in contrast to David Dobrik. The same elements of diary-like features, editing style, and stunts/pranks will be explored before also questioning Paul's role of possibly being a professional entertainer. Paul is often seen as the internet's villain, his family even referred to as "the Kardashians of Youtube".³ While Dobrik focuses on cultivating a connection to his audience by inviting him into the experience, Paul generates false controversy and drama as a means of attracting attention. This is especially evident in his fake marriage to fellow Youtuber Tana Mongeau which became a sensationalized event which was monetized in numerous ways. This event is comparable to Kim Kardashian's lucrative fake wedding to Kris Humphries which was televised in 2011. We will take a careful look at Paul's

³ Lorenz, Taylor. "What It's Like to Be the Parent of a Social-Media Star." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, January 17, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/01/raising-a-social-media-star/550418/>.

endorsements as well as interviews to discern what the intentions are behind his vlog. While Dobrik seems focused on pulling viewers into the action of the vlog, Paul seems focused on his personal goal of becoming a billionaire.

Today, more kids want to be a Youtuber when they grow up than an astronaut. In Chapter Four, I will look at how the influencer economy has created a new sense of the American Dream for Gen Z. Dobrik and Paul's examples of how one can succeed within the influencer economy without relying on the traditional education system. This growing trend of kids turned social media entrepreneurs is harnessed and commodified by Jake Paul's "Financial Freedom Movement." However, the pursuit of the influencer is a difficult task, especially considering how everyone is aspiring to attain the exact same status. Youtube has turned into a marketplace in which everyone must compete for attention, directly leading to Youtube's destructive prank culture that only rewards shock value. Reality is distorted and becomes disturbing when people become so desperate for clicks. Examples include Logan Paul's Suicide Forest Incident and FamilyOFive's abusive pranks. Youtube's prank culture can also be seen as part of a larger framework of "hegemonic masculinity", or a society that rewards males for aggressive behavior.

In my conclusion, I look at the greater narrative of Youtube and the influencer economy as a symptom of a more pervasive, and universal phenomenon-- the hyperreal. Boris Groys argues in the last chapter of his book *In the Flow* that the internet has led to the defictionalization of art. Art that circulates in more traditional mediums and institutions of distribution such as the museum or the theater allows spectators to become totally absorbed in the fictional worlds presented. Groys calls this process "self-oblivion" and "self-dissimulation," when one is able to spiritually leave everyday life and be totally immersed into the reality of the artwork. However,

as Marshall McLuhan argues, technologies such as our phones and laptops have become an entire extension of our physical self. However, we no longer have anything to assimilate into when the portals to our fictional worlds are carried around on devices everyday. While I analyzed the content which Gen Z consumes, I interviewed several Gen Z kids to understand the role that social media plays in both the online and physical world. In every interview, it was apparent that social media and digital editing tools provided each person with the ability to find more authentic connections online through the creations of their avatar. And so it seems that the authenticity that Gen Z values so much is found not in their visual representations, but the social bonds that transpire from their avatars. From this I offer two readings of the vloggers. The first a more optimistic look at how through the vlogger's unvarnished raw emotions, disparate groups of viewers are united in a community with its own inside jokes, language, and sense of identity. The other sees influencers as a chess piece played out by

Context

The Vlogging Influencer

As Crystal Abidin points out in *Internet Celebrity*, the 2010s saw the majority of press coverage focused on one type of celebrity: the influencer.⁴ The new celebrity figure is an ordinary person doing ordinary things. But on the internet, the ordinary can be manipulated and edited. Because you can now make money off of being an ordinary person doing ordinary things, a new economy has been created which rewards only the “hyperreal,” or an augmented version

⁴ Abidin, Crystal. *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*. United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing, 2018.

of reality. The influencer, as she goes on to describe, is someone who makes a living off their internet fame. The celebrity today no longer fits our usual connotations of an aloof yet glamorous Hollywood star groomed for the red carpet, but is instead a job occupied by ordinary people who transform their everyday life into a commodified spectacle. However, the ordinary should not be confused with being “typical”, “average”, or “representative of a population” Sociologist Laura Grinstaff argues that it is “merely convey[ing] that they are not experts or celebrities” to offer a first-hand experience and willingness to share whatever that is attention-worthy from their personal lives.⁵ Fame is no longer the effect of having and showcasing a specific talent or skill, but follows the “lived experience experience of the ‘ordinary’ which Graeme Turner calls “the demotic turn.”⁶ Demotic, meaning the kind popular or colloquial language used by ordinary people, signifies how the traditional star system has restructured itself such that our celebrity today is the average person performing their everyday life.⁷

While the pursuit of the influencer is a multi-platform affair that spans multiple social media sites, many of today’s influencers and their followings are born on Youtube in which the influencer owns a “vlog.” The word “vlog” is an amalgam of “video” and “blog,” with the vlogger being a video blogger. The old act of blogging and writing down one’s own personal thoughts and daily activities on their own web page has become extinct, the public diary taking on a new iteration in video format. And although TikTok and Snapchat also consist of video

⁵ Grindstaff, Laura. *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making on TV Talk Shows*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002.

⁶ Abidin, Crystal. *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*. United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing, 2018.

⁷ Turner, Graeme. “The Mass Production of Celebrity. ‘Celetoids’, Reality TV and the ‘Demotic Turn.’” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 2 (2006).

where one performs the self, it's a micro-video that functions, like Vine, more like a GIF.⁸ On Youtube, users upload videos up to 15 minutes long and verified accounts are allowed up to 12 hours long worth of material.⁹ Even if it's just one to two minutes, a Youtube video requires a prolonged performance and elaboration of intimacy that other social media sites simply do not provide. It often invokes a sense of voyeuristic people-watching, as if the viewer is breaching some sort of personal boundary. But vloggers are looking right into the camera, expecting and acknowledging our gaze as they speak directly to us. Sometimes it's a haul and they're showing us all their favorite products they've just purchased, while other times it's a "storytime" video in which they monologue juicy or shocking anecdotes from their personal life. No matter how banal, their videos offer audiences a sense of intimacy and unbridled natural self that can't be found in professional actors.

The allure of the vlogging influencer is clear-- as amateur creators, they convince us that who they are and the stories they tell are radically authentic. And since the vlog lives online within the context of Youtube's encyclopedic nature, the platform lends vloggers its sense of truth. You can find a vlogger's video next to a news clip, a how-to video, or even a university lectures. Trine Bjørkmann Berry calls it "nothing but a database" echoing Geert Lovnick's observation that "we no longer watch films or TV, we watch databases"¹⁰. But Youtube's evolution over the past 15 years has found itself not only quickly becoming the primary platform for video sharing, but has cultivated a culture and form of entertainment that has virtually

⁸ Pogue, David. "The Strange Magic of Micro Movies." *Scientific American* 308, no. 5 (2013): 34-35 .

⁹ "Upload Videos Longer than 15 Minutes - Android - YouTube Help." Google. Google. Accessed March 16, 2020. <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/71673?co=GENIE.Platform=Android&hl=en>.

¹⁰ Berry, Trine Bjørkmann. *VIDEOblogging Before Youtube*. Institute of Network Cultures, 2018.

replaced one of the most popular modes of entertainment-- television. We're no longer watching sitcoms or the stereotypical narrative formats associated with "popular entertainment," but amateur videos made by ordinary people that invite us right into its social sphere. We prefer scrolling through feeds, spying on our friends and neighbors as we watch to see what everyone else is doing around us.

The content on Youtube is not filtered out by entertainment executives, nor is it populated with the same famous faces of people who all look the same. Instead, Youtube is populated with diverse groups of people and allows for the often invisible "average" person who was never trained in entertainment, acting, or filmmaking to be heard and seen. But being an amateur is only an advantage to a vlogger. Vloggers show us what it means to be so utterly human, prone to mistakes and infinitely relatable. They pursue those accidental moments of spontaneity, that feeling that anything can happen when you document life as imperfect as it is. By publicizing their private lives, they create the kind of behind the scenes video footage that we're often left searching for after a movie when the scripted plot wasn't enough. As Abidin says, "As ordinary people are less filtered and orchestrated (than traditional celebrities who have been trained in media presentation), it's expected that ordinary people are more likely to display intense human emotions", referring to Grindstaff who calls the "money shot"¹¹

¹¹ Abidin, Crystal. *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*. United Kingdom: Emerald Publishing, 2018.

Gen Z & Influencers

Generation Z refers to the group of people who were born between 1997-2012 and are typically characterized with their “authenticity, candor, and cynicism.”¹² Often called “digital natives”, they grew up on the internet and were surrounded by the first, Millennial influencers (born between 1981- 1995), before now almost entirely driving the influencer economy by themselves. Their emphasis on authenticity is a value embodied and reflected back to them through the influencer. 72% of Gen Z consumers said they would unfollow an influencer over disingenuous endorsements while 69% would unfollow for any promotion of an unrealistic or misrepresented lifestyle.¹³ But to understand Gen Z, we must look to their social context for an explanation of their emphasis on truth. Generation Z and their search for the truth¹⁴ can easily be traced to growing up in an age of information overload. A survey by the firm Altitude had found that Gen Z have what researchers call an “eight-second filter”.¹⁵ This does not refer to a shrunken attention span, but to a radar that has allowed people to adapt in a world where large amounts of information must be quickly sorted through and assessed. For Gen Z, “options are limitless but their time is not”. Mark Schaefer also links the prioritization of authenticity to information overload, calling it “primitive methods of sorting information” that have developed out of our

¹² “Gen Z Is Using Social Media To Get Real. These Brands Are Keeping Up.” PSFK, February 7, 2020.

<https://www.psfk.com/2019/11/millennials-gen-z-getting-real-social-media-brands-impact.html>.

¹³ “Gen Z Is Using Social Media To Get Real. These Brands Are Keeping Up.” PSFK, February 7, 2020.

<https://www.psfk.com/2019/11/millennials-gen-z-getting-real-social-media-brands-impact.html>.

¹⁴ Francis, Tracy, and Fernanda Hoefel. “True Gen!: Generation Z and Its Implications for Companies.” McKinsey & Company, November 2018.

<https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/true-gen-generation-z-and-its-implications-for-companies>.

¹⁵ Uhlman, Carissa. “Adapting to Gen Z A Higher Education Guide.” Inceptia, February 2018.

https://www.inceptia.org/PDF/Inceptia_AdaptingGenZ_ResearchBrief_031518.pdf.

tremendously saturated digital world.¹⁶ Perhaps this is why Gen Z is also considered “hyper-cognitive”, constantly having to parse out what is worthy of their trust, attention, and time.

The critical nature of Gen Z with their 8-second filter and emphasis on authenticity offers the underlying explanation of why we have seen such a distinctive shift on the internet towards content that feels less posed, and more unfiltered. Last June, Marianne Eloise commented on this distinct shift in the content of influencers and how the old norm of an obsessively curated sense of self has changed to what seems like a radical culture of laziness. “We don’t want to be told how to live, what to wear, what festivals to attend, what tea to drink,” she writes, mainly focusing on Instagram¹⁷. This change from calculated, staged imagery to one that is supposed to be a more brutal representation of life can be traced back to Gen Z and their proclivity towards authenticity. As one 15-year old said, “Avocado toast and posts on the beach. It’s so generic and played out at this point. You can photoshop any girl into that background and it will be the same post...It’s not cool anymore to be manufactured.”¹⁸ Gen Z’s clear emphasis on authenticity explains why today’s kids are more drawn to Youtube personalities than traditional Hollywood stars. In 2014, Celebrity brand strategist, Jeetendr Sehdev conducted a study where he asked 1,500 teens to assess how 20 well-known personalities ranked in terms of approachability, authenticity, and overall influence. The top five were all Youtubers. As Sehdev says, “If YouTube stars are swallowed by Hollywood, they are in danger of becoming less authentic

¹⁶ Francis, Tracy, and Fernanda Hoefel. “True Gen’: Generation Z and Its Implications for Companies.” McKinsey & Company, November 2018.

¹⁷ Eloise, Marianne. “Is the Era of the Influencer over, or Just Evolving?” Dazed, June 13, 2019. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/44850/1/influencer-era-over-evolving-instagram-bloggers>.

¹⁸ Lorenz, Taylor. “The Instagram Aesthetic Is Over.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, April 24, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/04/influencers-are-abandoning-instagram-look/587803/>.

versions of themselves, and teenagers will be able to pick up on that...That could take away the one thing that makes YouTube stars so appealing.”¹⁹

What is the Influencer Economy?

At a time when truth and authenticity matter the most, companies both small and large are flocking to social media personalities as a means of advertising their products. One study by Musfind has found that 92% of consumers trust influencers over traditional celebrities.²⁰ We are no longer sold products, but the lifestyles they represent as mediated and shown to us by our influencers. Today’s marketing strategy works by exploiting the sincerity that social media personalities offer by insidiously sneaking their products into the influencer’s storytelling of their everyday life. When an influencer is told to seamlessly incorporate a product into their own personal imagery and content, companies are able to insert themselves into the bond shared between the influencer and their following and parlay that intimacy onto their product. It’s a transitive relationship of exploitation that forces audiences to assume a product to be worthy based on the trust that they have for an influencer. It extends even further when companies create their own brand identity by curating a constellation of influencers who appear to support and reflect the image of the company. And so if authenticity is the new currency, its value is to be mined in the social media accounts of influencers, microcelebrities, and everyday people.

¹⁹ Ault, Susanne. “Survey: YouTube Stars More Popular Than Mainstream Celebs Among U.S. Teens.” *Variety*. Variety, August 5, 2014. <https://variety.com/2014/digital/news/survey-youtube-stars-more-popular-than-mainstream-celebs-among-u-s-teens-1201275245/>

²⁰ Weinswig, Deborah. “Influencers Are The New Brands.” *Forbes*, Forbes Magazine, 5 Oct. 2016, www.forbes.com/sites/deborahweinswig/2016/10/05/influencers-are-the-new-brands/#1398f1107919.

In 2019, NPR interviewed a college student, Cosette Rinab, who was planning on turning her Instagram and Tik Tok posts into her full time career. Cosette speaks of the potential rewards of the influencer economy saying that people are able to make more money from YouTube than if they were to pursue a career in medicine. In another interview, Taylor Lorenz, internet culture writer at the New York Times, explained the business of the new influencer economy in clear terms-- huge companies the size of Walmart are projected to spend upwards of \$10 billion by 2020 so that they can advertise their products through “regular” people and their social media accounts. The point is, as Lorenz states, that “it doesn’t feel like an ad.” By going through the seemingly average person, huge companies can find more success in luring in potential customers from the intimate relationships between influencers and their following. As Lorenz says, “[people] often follow people who they aspire to be like, or people that seem like them and resonate with their lifestyle.”²¹ The role of an influencer is simply in the word itself-- they influence other people. As trendsetters and community leaders, they are aspirational figures to be emulated. That means when someone sees an influencer they like using a product, the product not only appears credible and relevant, but presents itself as a tangible way of reproducing the influencer’s lifestyle.

The goal of the company that chooses to advertise through an influencer is to implicate themselves into the overall aesthetic of the influencer’s social media. Although it may seem like companies are making puppets out of influencers, influencers are looking to companies and seeking sponsorships to prove themselves as legitimate, established figures. It is a bidirectional relationship in which companies gain the value of the influencer’s authenticity while the

²¹ “The Money And Trade-Offs Involved In The Influencer Economy.” NPR. NPR, June 10, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/2019/06/10/731385508/the-money-and-trade-offs-involved-in-the-influencer-economy>.

influencer gains a sense of superiority through the company's recognition. This recognition has become so integral to the appearance of success on social media that many aspiring influencers have begun to forge fake advertisements. In a video called "I Had 30 Days to Become an Instagram Influencer", Vice's Sally Burtnick interviews the influencer Amy Rebecca for tips on gaining a following. In addition to revealing that she practices her facial expressions for two hours a day, Rebecca opens up about how it's common for many budding influencers to fake sponsorships with a brand. These people, as she explains, will buy large amounts of clothing from trendy fast-fashion sites such as Pretty Little Thing or Fashion Nova, take photos in them with the hashtag "#ad" in the caption, and then return their items. Rebecca says when you appear as though you are sponsored by one brand, it creates an avalanche effect that signals to other companies that you're worth working with.²² Taylor Lorenz wrote about this phenomenon for *The Atlantic* last year telling similar stories of influencers attempting to hack the algorithm of internet fame. Several teenagers were interviewed, most of them admitting to having faked a sponsorship with a brand on social media to appear successful. One 15 year-old, Allie explains the fake sponsorship as an attempt to be superior, that they receive free things for being a distinguished person while all the "losers" as she calls them still have to pay. Another 15 year-old, Henry, who says that although he has not faked a sponsorship, people have come up to him in the hallways at school asking if he's sponsored or not. He's also noticed a strong correlation between his popularity at school with how many followers he has on social media.²³

²² "I Had 30 Days to Become an Instagram Influencer." Vice, 17 Nov. 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=XqV8dwAf5ug.

²³ Lorenz, Taylor. "Rising Instagram Stars Are Posting Fake Sponsored Content." *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, December 18, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/12/influencers-are-faking-brand-deals/578401/>.

To make money on Youtube, a vlogger must first make consistent videos and have a decent audience before applying to the Youtube Partnership Program. Users must cross the threshold of 4,000 watch hours and 1,000 subscribers in order for Youtube to review the account and allow the user to create a Google AdSense account. With Google AdSense, Youtubers can then make money with the different styles of ads that either appear to the right of the video, as a banner under the video, or as mini videos that occur during the video. However, monetization for channels at all levels can be affected depending on how accurately Youtube's algorithm processes its contents as "advertiser friendly." Every single video on Youtube is run through the AI driven algorithm, which processes not only the video itself, but keywords in its description as well as the video's thumbnail image. The algorithm will then flag videos based on Youtube's policies, which pull ads based on surrounding nudity, drugs and dangerous substances, war, terrorism or extremism, death and tragedies, and any physical or psychological injury.²⁴ Youtube Red was another program that allowed Youtubers to make money by actually funded top ranking creators with the ability to create more "prestigious" shows.²⁵ But even if a user's videos are demonetized, there are other sources of revenue for Youtubers such as merch or personal sponsorships with brands that are mediated outside of Youtube.

As the influencer economy grows, middlemen businesses have been popping up everywhere, creating new platforms to serve and capitalize off the newly flourishing marketplace. Jamison Hill of the investment firm Bain Capital Ventures says that we are in the

²⁴ "YouTube Channel Monetization Policies - YouTube Help." Google. Google. Accessed May 4, 2020. <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/1311392?hl=en>.

²⁵ Alexander, Julia. "Jake Paul and Tana Mongeau's over-the-Top 'Wedding' Is Part of a Bigger YouTube Phenomenon." The Verge. The Verge, July 29, 2019. <https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/29/8934858/jake-paul-tana-mongeau-wedding-mtv-reality-house-youtube>.

third phase of the influencer economy. “The first phase was the rise of the media platforms: YouTube, Instagram, etcetera, that allowed creatives to build audiences. The second phase was the emergence of influencer marketing, or connecting those influencers to brands to leverage their audiences...Now that influencer marketing has become an established part of the marketing playbook, we are in phase three: tools to help influencers further monetize their influence...”²⁶

For Youtube, there are talent management agencies that exist specifically for the platform such as Maker Studios, Fullscreen and Machinima. Their goal is to link companies to a network of Youtubers and offer them the connections needed to create brand partnerships.²⁷ Home-brewed DIY influencers are now managed by PR teams and agencies such as “IMA”, which describes itself as “the leading agency for global influencer marketing” which consists of “specialists includ[ing] strategists, producers, influencer project managers, designers, developers, digital marketing analysts and social media experts” that help support your social media brand by “defining goals and objectives to complete campaign execution”. The language is vague, but basically they seem to pair you up with brand name products that one can advertise on their social media sites and make money off of. Maddie Raedts, the founder and CCO of IMA commented on the value of the ordinary, “People are looking for unique feeds— less polished, but much more real, interesting and artistic. This makes you stand out from the tough-to-beat algorithms these days.”²⁸

²⁶ Clark, Kate. “Venture Capitalists 'like and Subscribe' to Influencers.” TechCrunch. TechCrunch, November 4, 2019. <https://techcrunch.com/2019/11/04/venture-capitalists-like-and-subscribe-to-influencers/>.

²⁷ Haryacha, Polina. “How To Find The Right YouTube Influencers For Your Brand.” *TechCrunch*, TechCrunch, 31 Dec. 2014, techcrunch.com/2014/12/31/how-to-find-the-right-youtube-influencers-for-your-brand/.

²⁸ Eloise, Marianne. “Is the Era of the Influencer over, or Just Evolving?” Dazed, June 13, 2019. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/44850/1/influencer-era-over-evolving-instagram-bloggers>.

The Hyperreal

On Youtube, it's the amateur aspect of the videos that viewers find convincingly authentic. Despite the fact that they're planned, the general tone of a vlog must remain sincere, casual, and candid. But it's important to remember that social media entertainment only uses the banal everyday world as the backdrop/framework for its performance. At the crux of the performance is pulling it off as believable. The vlogger benefits from their platform's context, deriving a sense of trustworthiness from Youtube's image of being a seemingly objective encyclopedia. But although Youtube vloggers persuade their viewers that they are just like them, vloggers are undoubtedly entertainers who play augmented caricatures of themselves for their constructed narratives. The majority of popular vloggers are from Los Angeles, which is no surprise considering the masses of aspiring actors who move there each year in hopes of making it big in Hollywood. While vlogs may represent unedited and documentary-like truthfulness to Gen Z, their consumption of what appears to be authentic is only a pre-packaged rendering of it.

The term "hyperreality" is essential in understanding why Youtube and the reality that vloggers present us with are only augmented versions of it. While each theorist has their own varied definition of "hyperreality", the concept can be generally understood as when our simulations and representations replace our natural occurring reality. Theorist Jean Baudrillard explained postmodern life as a hyperreality in which "entertainment, information, and communication technologies provide experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of

banal everyday life”.²⁹ In effect, it is the hyperreality that has come to dominate our embodied consciousness, asserting itself as “more real than real”. When our simulations determine our thoughts, emotions, and behavior, hyperreality is to be considered as the only existing reality. Examples of simulacra as Thomas Heyd points out, include artificially flavored foods, concrete buildings covered in laminate materials to simulate wooden surfaces, consuming nature online, “travelling” via online videos, and even making our kids invest care in fake electronic pets.³⁰ A more contemporary example of Baudrillard’s simulacra is the phenomenon of young women getting plastic surgery in order to look more like Instagram’s selfie filters. The simulation is based on a simulation with no bearing in the naturally occurring world.

When an image asserts itself as unabashedly “real”, is when we should be the most apprehensive of it. Because as our collective appetite for “authentic” imagery grows, so does our unintentional faith in a hyperreality. Youtube’s foundation of promised honesty has set up vlogging to be successful only because of its false premise that keeps viewers assuming everything and everyone is only ever true, honest, and real. And since our amateur creators are unattached to corporate powers, we also assume that their grassroots efforts are filled with pure incentives of honest communication. Instead, what has emerged is a genre of entertainment in which formalism masquerades around as devoted realism. When asked which platform they want to turn to when they want to relax or cheer up, Gen-Z responded with Youtube as their number one choice.³¹ Vicariously living through the screen is a common trope associated with Gen Z.

²⁹ Kellner, Douglas. “Jean Baudrillard.” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, December 18, 2019. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ baudrillard/#EarlWritSystObjMirrProd>.

³⁰ Heyd, Thomas. “The Real and the Hyperreal: Dance and Simulacra.” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 34, no. 2 (2000): 15-26.

³¹ Baron, Jessica. “The Key To Gen Z Is Video Content.” *Forbes*. Forbes Magazine, July 3, 2019. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jessicabaron/2019/07/03/the-key-to-gen-z-is-video-content/#29f86ddb3484>.

But it's not far from the truth. Socializing as a teen or young adult today does not resemble the rebellious kids who smoke, drink, and make out in the back of cars like we so often see depicted in movies. Instead, everyone is more isolated scrolling away on Instagram. And when they do hang out, they document every part of it.

The number of teens getting together with their friends almost everyday has dropped by more than 40 percent from 2000 to 2015. And in 2015, seniors in highschool were going out less than eighth graders did in 2009. Getting one's driver's license is no longer a symbol of freedom and earning one's own pocket money as a teen is happening less and less as fewer kids are working jobs. As psychologist Jean M. Twenge says in *The Atlantic*, it was 2012 when she noticed abrupt shifts in teen behaviors and emotional states that no longer found independence as a coming of age rite. This was the year in which the number of Americans owning a smartphone was more than 50%. Teens, she says, are more comfortable in their bedrooms than at a party; they consume less alcohol and are statistically less sexually active. And while the generation has less teen pregnancy rates and are less susceptible to the host of ailments that alcohol bring about, rates of teen depression and suicide have surged since 2011. Twenge calls it "the worst mental-health crisis in decades". Too much phone time is of course not the only reason depression and suicide as teen suicide rates were even higher in the 90's when there was no such thing as a smartphone. But as Twenge points out, four times as many Americans are on antidepressants.³²

³² Twenge, Jean M. "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 19 Mar. 2018, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/?utm_source=atlfb.

In her article on “Have Smartphones Destroyed an Entire Generation”, Jean Twenge brings up the photographer Bill Yates who had shot a series of teens in the 70’s at the Sweetheart Roller Skating Rink in Tampa, Florida. The photos depict teenagers carefree, smoking and drinking with their friends. Today, social life amongst youths is not organized by physical space or location, but is created by online networks and filtered through one’s online persona. Who follows who is more conducive to delineating a social group than figuring out where one lives. But maybe this says something about Gen Z-- that they’re able to socially situate themselves based on interests rather than socialize out of geographic convenience. When you view someone’s social profile online, for example on Instagram, we can see their page as a declaration of identity. Profiles are filled with photos and visual markers that act as symbols to represent them almost tribally. Who they’re following and who follows them will socially situate that person, their tagged photos adding another layer to reveal who they associate with and where they’ve been. The imagery that one chooses to personify themselves with online can be more telling of who they are than if we were to meet them in real life. At least, this is the way Gen Z kids seem to think. Does it mean we’re more cliquy and judgmental? Or does it mean that we’re just able to better organize ourselves with like-minded individuals? Sometimes online friendships can migrate into real life encounters while other times, the people we follow remain mysterious avatars and become subject to our incessant projections.

While the young generation seems to be struggling with socializing, it has only migrated online. As Ursula Franklin says in her book *The Real World of Technology*, “technology has developed practical means to overcome the limitations of distance and time”, explaining further

that it is our devices which now structure our social and political landscapes³³. Social media is inherently interactive and on Youtube, whether one is creating videos or just watching them, the relationship amongst all parties is that in which everyone is equal. Since everyone is equipped with a smartphone and the ability to record themselves, vloggers are simply seen as people who choose to publicize their camera roll. As Strangelove says,

Unlike watching television, many members of the YouTube audience have a different relationship to the screen because they are also producers of videos. Thus, the new media audience interacts with amateur videos from its dual stance as producer and as consumer of video. This adds a new dimension to the character of the online audience and is often reflected in the YouTuber's attitude towards the video work of fellow amateurs.³⁴

³³ Franklin, Ursula M. *The Real World of Technology*. Brantford, Ont.: W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2012.

³⁴ Patterson, Charles. "Lope on YouTube: Film Analysis and Amateur Video Production in a "Comedia" Course." *Hispania* 98, no. 3 (2015): 522-32.

Chapter 1: A History of the Vlog

Youtube was developed out of Web 2.0, which is generally characterized by the rise of social media sites on the internet which had made the online experience more convenient for non-tech users. It was the difference between clicking on Youtube's "one click" embedding of a link to be shared with all your friends on the Facebook Timeline rather than waiting for someone to visit your blog after manually entering the link into an email. The simplification that allowed more people to use the internet meant more people, and more communication at faster, more instantaneous rates. This is why social media sites such as that developed in the early 2000's such as Youtube are attributed with creating an online participatory culture.³⁵ The new participatory culture online had put the power in the people's hand to create a democratic environment in which the individual has the power to create and disseminate information. Tim O' Reilly, who had coined the term Web 2.0 had described the early days of the internet with the philosophy that technology was to

"empower the individual, enhance personal freedom, and radically reduce the power of the nation-state. Existing social, political and legal power structures will wither away to be replaced by unfettered interactions between autonomous individuals and their software"³⁶.

The ideology that insists that the 'information highway' is rife with revolutionary potential and defined an entire generation of writers and thinkers who romanticized a network of decentralized

³⁵ Berry, Trine Bjørkmann. *VIDEOblogging before Youtube*. Institute of Network Cultures, 2018.

³⁶ Berry, Trine Bjørkmann. *VIDEOblogging before Youtube*. Institute of Network Cultures, 2018.

and immaterial communication, such as John Perry Barlow who in his 1996 *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* had called for a separation of the internet and the government.³⁷

The first video ever uploaded onto Youtube is called “Me at the zoo.” It’s eighteen seconds long and shows a young boy probably in his early twenties in front of two elephants. The video starts abruptly, he’s looking at the camera and says “Alright so here we are, uh, in front of the elephants.” He’s a bit awkward and hesitant, pausing and punctuating his few sentences with “uh’s” and “ums.” He looks back at the elephants, “The cool thing about these guys is that they have really, really, really, long trunks and that’s, that’s cool. And that’s pretty much all there is to say”. The blurry video is dated April 23rd, 2005 with a location tagging San Diego. What looks like a video meant to be sent to his mom as proof of where he is, currently has 79,357,771 views and 3,810,316 comments.³⁸ Granted, the fact that it was the first ever Youtube video to be uploaded most definitely plays a part in its popularity. The second video ever posted onto Youtube is called “My Snowboarding Skillz” and is a ten--second long clip that follows a snowboarder as he attempts to grind across a ramp before quickly falling backwards into the snow. It’s too slow and benign to provoke the kind of sudden laughter that the common brutal and oftentimes violent “fail” video of someone falling and hurting themselves would trigger, but it has 807,136 views and 5,420 comments. Most of the first few videos that followed are seemingly just as mundane-- another snowboarding video, a teen girl jokingly riding in a toy car, a straightforward panoramic view of the Olympic stadium in Munich. And while some get a little bit more exciting, (like in one video a person shows themselves getting a haircut at a public

³⁷ Berry, Trine Bjørkman. *VIDEOblogging BEFORE YOUTUBE*. Institute of Network Cultures, 2018.

³⁸ *Me at the Zoo*. Youtube, 2005. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jNQXAC9IVRw>.

park and in another someone backflips off a roof), they all have the familiar shaky raw footage of a private home video capturing the everyday.

Youtube has the familiar origin story of any other Silicon Valley start-up. Just three young computer science guys in their early twenties who had all met while working at Paypal, Jawed Karim, Steve Chen, and Chad Hurley had created Youtube not fully sure of how to market it, and called it an online dating service with its slogan “Tune in, Hook up” as a way of generating interest. But the creators had struggled to find any solid user base with its \$100 monthly membership that was necessary in order for the server to host the videos, which would then only be distributed to users at random. Youtube’s conception was chaotic and disorganized, the creators themselves weren’t fully sure of what it was that they had created and were uploading videos of Boeing 747s taking off and landing onto what they had publicly announced as a network for dating. They tried attracting more people by pretending as if it were already flourishing, offering monetary compensation to women who were willing to upload a video of themselves. The undefined website had found itself with a surge of activity, people uploading a diverse range of videos that had nothing to do with Boeing 747s or dating. Maybe it was this chaos and sense of vague uncertainty that allowed users to feel comfortable uploading whatever they wanted. Co-founder Karim had found the development interesting, following the users’ lead saying “why not let the users define what YouTube is all about?”.³⁹

Between the years 2006 and 2008, Youtube grew at a phenomenal rate only taking a few years to become the main source for videos, practically monopolizing the distribution of online

³⁹ Koebler, Jason. Vice, April 23, 2015.
https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/78xqjx/10-years-ago-today-youtube-launched-as-a-dating-website.

videos. In 2008, Youtube had received 64 million individual visitors and was the third most visited website in the United States after Google and Yahoo. It had become so impossible to keep up with the high in-flux of videos being uploaded that the platform was forced to remove its “recently uploaded” tab.⁴⁰ The platform has amassed a tremendous amount of videos that span an immense range of topics and subcultures which reads like an encyclopedia as thorough as Google’s search engine. It can be used for all sorts of ends, whether it be educational or entertainment based. Trine Bjørkmann Berry calls it “nothing but a database” echoing Geert Lovnick’s observation that “we no longer watch films or TV, we watch databases”.⁴¹ But Youtube’s evolution over the past 15 years has found itself not only quickly becoming the primary platform for video sharing, but has cultivated a culture and form of entertainment that has virtually replaced one of the most popular modes of entertainment-- television. We’re no longer watching sitcoms or the stereotypical narrative formats associated with “popular entertainment”, but amateur videos made by ordinary people that invite us right into its social sphere. As Michael Strangelove says, we are now post-television. Now we prefer scrolling through feeds, spying on our friends and neighbors as we watch to what everyone else is doing around us.⁴²

On Youtube, one can find news clips, music videos, recipes, how-to videos, movie trailers, university lectures, paparazzi footage, audition tapes that were never meant for our eyes,

⁴⁰ Berry, Trine Bjørkmann. *VIDEOblogging Before Youtube*. Institute of Network Cultures, 2018.

⁴¹ Berry, Trine Bjørkmann. *VIDEOblogging Before Youtube*. Institute of Network Cultures, 2018.

⁴² Strangelove, Michael. *Watching YouTube: Extraordinary Videos by Ordinary People*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011.

tours of buildings we'll never be able to see, and evidence that aliens might actually exist. And it's not filtered out by entertainment executives nor is it populated with the same famous faces of people who all look the same. Instead, Youtube is populated with diverse groups of people and allows for the often invisible "average" person who was never trained in entertainment, acting, or filmmaking to be heard and seen. As documentary filmmaker Chuck Olsen says, " We're going from being media consumers to media makers".⁴³ It's as easy as having access to a phone, camera, webcam, or any recording device and the internet and anyone can upload their own user-generated content. And so rather than being passive audiences at the behest of corporate control of media and entertainment, Youtube has transformed the status of the ordinary person into one that is equipped with the ability to not just watch and interpret, but comment and produce content of their own.

Youtube creator Chad Hurley had once said "we are providing a stage where everyone can participate and everyone can be seen...We see ourselves as a combination of America's Home Video and Entertainment Tonight". Youtube came at a time when the internet had shifted towards what is called "Web 2.0", a term that came to symbolize the new technical changes and social media sites that allowed for internet use to be convenient for the user experience and was thus heralded as what would usher in a new environment of online participatory culture. Web 2.0 is especially defined by the advent of social media sites that simplified the technical processes that videoblogging would have posed on the internet before a site like Youtube, putting users in dialogue with one another. It was the difference between clicking on Youtube's "one click"

⁴³ Berry, Trine Bjørkmann. *VIDEObLOGGING BEFORE YOUTUBE*. Institute of Network Cultures, 2018.

embedding of a link to be shared with all your friends on the Facebook Timeline rather than waiting for someone to visit your blog after manually entering the link into an email.

Many of the popular Youtubers today had found their start on an application called Vine which had launched in January of 2013 and accrued 13 million regular users in the span of just six months. Many of the same high energy jump cuts on Vine have carried over to Youtube. Vine was an application only to be used on smartphones where users were constrained to six seconds of video, which would then be looped endlessly as if it were a GIF. While many have credited the time constraint as a reason for the application's creative production, the six second limitation can be explained in the context of cellular video in 2012, when taking videos with a smartphone was not only in its beginning stages but most people were worried about surpassing their cellphone plan's data limit. David Pogue categorizes Vine videos as part of the rise in popularity of "micro videos", that along with GIFs can be characterized as what he says are short, crude, and jerky despite video science only progressing towards better resolution, higher frame rates, and richer audio. Pogue points to how technical limitations of bandwidth and cell-phone plan costs stood in the way of higher quality videos, but that micro videos worked in that "short video gets the message across but loads almost instantly and doesn't run up your bill or waste your time".⁴⁴ And so Youtube's vlogging aesthetic of high energy, quick cuts that make a single narrative look like a frenetic compilation emerged from the time period's technological constraints.

⁴⁴ Pogue, David. "The Strange Magic of Micro Movies." *Scientific American* 308, no. 5 (2013): 34-35.

Online video sharing prior to the advent of Youtube was more dispersed and trickier due to the internet's early stages. Bandwidth was slow and costly, there was no universal video standard (formats and players were only compatible with certain devices), storage was limited, and it was hard to keep up with the amount of constant updates. On January 2nd 2000, Adam Kontras had posted what is considered to be the first vlog to his website which showed him sneaking his cat into a hotel through the lobby with his fiancée. He had posted videos to his personal website all throughout 2000, but it seems clear that there wasn't a large audience viewing his content.⁴⁵ Early videoblogging before Youtube was a marginal practice according to Trine Bjørkmann Berry, who describes it as developed by a technically savvy community which included developers and programmers who worked both in collaboration as well as in competition with one another debating the ideal video platform which they had called "platform imaginary". People had been predicting a platform like YouTube for what Jean Burgess says is about a decade before it actually had started. He quotes Marc Davis, who in 1997 spoke about "garage cinema," which was an analogy to punk bands practicing in garages.

Changes in technology will bring about a merging of independent video producers and home video makers into a broad and active market sector ...

When the tools and infrastructure are in place to enable cheap and effective home use of video annotation, retrieval and repurposing tools, the garages of the world will be the site of the 'New New Hollywood' creating hundreds of millions of channels of video content. The conditions of production and use will have changed such that a large group of amateurs and home users will be

⁴⁵ Berry, Trine Bjørkmann. *VIDEOblogging before YOUTUBE*. Institute of Network Cultures, 2018.

regularly making video that can compete in the information marketplace of networked computers.⁴⁶

In December of 2000, Adrian Miles posted his first iteration of what was to be known as the “Vogma manifesto”. In it, Miles lays out his principles of what a vlog, or “vog” as he calls it should be. Over the years, Miles expanded on his manifesto, turning it into a full article, which has been widely cited. In The Vogma Manifesto, Miles wrote that a “vog”;

respects bandwidth

is not streaming video (this is not the reinvention of television)

uses performative video and/or audio

is personal uses available technology experiments with writerly video and audio

lies between writing and the televisual explores the proximate distance of words and moving media

is Dziga Vertov with a mac and a modem.⁴⁷

Mile’s definition of a vlog is relevant to where it stood at the time, still limited to the parameters of bandwidth and developing video technology. But it also touched on how a vlog is still a subjective illusion created from what feels like raw, documentary-like footage by comparing it to filmmaker Dziga Vertov’s “kino-eye”. Kino-eye described Vertov’s idea that the cinematic eye

⁴⁶ Burgess, Jean, and Joshua Green. *Youtube (Digital Media and Society)*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2009.

⁴⁷ Berry, Trine Bjørkmann. *VIDEOblogging BEFORE YOUTUBE*. Institute of Network Cultures, 2018.

could capture a better sense of reality than what the human eye could see. Another important aspect to The Vogma Manifesto is how it delineates a vlog as a personal practice for an individual rather than a product of a corporation or business. Struggling with bandwidth and lack of a universal video standard, video blogging still had a long way to go in 2000 when Miles' manifesto came out. In 2004, Jay Dedman and Peter van Dijk had created the Videoblogging Yahoo Group, which was an email list functioning as the “central hub”⁴⁸ for the video blogging community. The email list evolved into a “membership” mentality where people had shared a sense of community through video blogging. Mica Scalin, an artist and member of the Yahoo list saw online video as a medium of web content that could “truly come into its own and begin establishing its unique language”.

As Jean Burgess points out, not every amateur media maker wants to turn pro or change the world. He gives the example of a news story that traced Youtube's beginnings to fan videos all the way back to 1975 when “fan vidders” had developed techniques with digital editing tools to define their own subculture's aesthetic. Interviewed is the fan-vidder, Kandy Fong, who made slide show presentations with pop songs over them for Star Trek Conventions. When Henry Jenkins wrote *Textual Poachers* in 1992, the fan vidders avoided making their work public for fear of copyright violation from film studios and networks. Not only that, they were also scared that their work would be recontextualized by people outside of their subculture. Their work was distributed and shared between members at events as well as on smaller platforms such as IMeem which were “friend-locked” and required a password for access. There were many debates that had played out on Livejournal and fan conventions about what would happen if

⁴⁸ Berry, Trine Bjørkman. *VIDEOBLOGGING BEFORE YOUTUBE*. Institute of Network Cultures, 2018.

producers and networks found out about their work vs. their public inclusion into history and discourse at large of technology and mashup culture.⁴⁹ In 2007, New York magazine had written a profile on Luminosity, a “leader in the viding movement” where fan vids were exhibited alongside other subcultures. For these people, making videos was not incentivized with ideas of fame or money, and posting to Youtube was in fact avoided.⁵⁰

In October 2006, Google acquired YouTube for \$1.65 billion.⁵¹ The change had forced Youtube to deal with its issues of piracy that had upset movie studios, record labels, and television conglomerates with their plethora of bootlegged, recycled, and reuploaded content. It was when Youtube executives had to get rid of so many of these videos that violated copyrights that platform had further defined itself as a place for self-made creator culture to flourish.⁵² Youtube, like many new media companies, relies solely on the content production of their users to create revenue. This business model functioning in the new internet economy termed “wikinomics”⁵³ articulates how companies can gain profit when they “design and assemble products with their customers” to create a product. Some say it is exploitation while others call it the creation of democracy. Tapscott and Williams say that it’s based on exploiting “openness, peering, sharing, and acting globally” and obscures labor by transforming it into our everyday acts of communication that function more like a commodity.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Burgess, Jean, and Joshua Green. *Youtube (Digital Media and Society)*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2009.

⁵⁰ Hill, Logan. “Q&A With Ultimate Fan Luminosity - Online Videos 2007 -- New York Magazine - Nymag.” New York Magazine. New York Magazine, November 8, 2007. <https://nymag.com/movies/features/videos/40622/>.

⁵¹ Sorkin, Andrew Ross, and Jeremy W. Peters. “Google to Acquire YouTube for \$1.65 Billion.” The New York Times. The New York Times, October 9, 2006. <https://www.nytimes.com/2006/10/09/business/09cnd-deal.html>.

⁵² Burgess, Jean, and Joshua Green. *Youtube (Digital Media and Society)*. Oxford: Polity Press, 2009.

⁵³ Sahu, Akhilendra, and Saqib Malik. *The YouTube: A Full History*, 2019.

⁵⁴ Sahu, Akhilendra, and Saqib Malik. *The YouTube: A Full History*, 2019.

A year later, Youtube launched its ‘Youtube Partner Program’ which, as I’ve mentioned before meant that Youtube videos could be monetized for vloggers to transform their Youtube channels into lucrative careers.⁵⁵ The potential of earning money via vlogging has created a mass incentive for videos to have a more professional look while still remaining “DIY”. Amazon now has a “vlogging equipment” category on its site that lists out some of the top rated products that vloggers should be using. I clicked on the list today and realized many of the newer tech products that have been created are designed to elevate and heighten the simple video function of the iPhone. These somewhat gimmicky products include the clip-on lavalier microphone. A lavalier microphone is a small microphone most often used for more professional productions of television, theater, and public speaking so that one can perform hands-free. Named the “YouMic” with its logo and name mimicking Youtube, the mini iPhone clip-on preserves the sincerity of the everyday iPhone quality to create a look of raw footage while enhancing its audio quality to a professional level. Though, most vloggers these days no longer use an iPhone and have headed straight for the professional cameras, deeming iPhone production just too low quality. The new monetary incentive has motivated users to put more time and effort into their work, investing in new technology and equipment and in effect, creating a new market of newer technologies specific for their needs.

In 2011, Youtube had launched a program called the “Original Channel Initiative” in which the platform had spent over 100 million dollars to attract household names such as Pharrell, Sofia Vergara, and the *Wall Street Journal* to create their own original content. As Sophie Kleenman points out, Youtube is comprised of two opposing sides— the first being the

⁵⁵ <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/72851?hl=en>

creator network of “makeup gurus, scientists, activists, gamers, comedians, ukulele players, and any other sub-communit[ies]” and the second being “Vevo music videos, segments from late night shows, content from magazines like *Wired* and *Vogue*, and our celebrity vloggers.”⁵⁶

Youtube has now shifted towards integrating themselves into a more mainstream idea of entertainment explains Arun Sundararajan, a professor of business at NYU, adding full length movie titles into their library as well as bringing in big celebrity names. “It’s part of a broader strategy to catch up with Amazon, Netflix, and Hulu, who seem to have leaped to the next generation of paid video,”⁵⁷ he says. Today, Youtube seems to resemble the next generation of reality television. It’s unclear what people’s intentions are and to what extent they are being honest. Adding traditional celebrities into the mix only confuses the landscape further. Annette Hill defines Reality TV as a wide category of entertainment about real people “between information and entertainment, documentary and drama”. It combines documentary filmmaking’s devotion to truth with a scripted structure of television traditions. “Where documentaries must construct their narratives from found matter, reality TV can place real people in artificial surroundings designed for maximum emotional impact,”⁵⁸ Hill says.

⁵⁶ Kleeman, Sophie. “Why A-List Celebrities Are Turning Into Vloggers.” Vice, August 27, 2019. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/43kvvn/im-a-celebrity-get-me-on-youtube-jennifer-lopez-naomi-campbell-will-smith.

⁵⁷ Kleeman, Sophie. “Why A-List Celebrities Are Turning Into Vloggers.” Vice, August 27, 2019. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/43kvvn/im-a-celebrity-get-me-on-youtube-jennifer-lopez-naomi-campbell-will-smith.

⁵⁸ Hill, Annette. *Reality TV: Audiences and Popular Factual Television*. London: Routledge, 2014.

Chapter 2: David Dobrik and “The Vlog Squad”

Diary-like

David Dobrik is a 23 year old Youtuber who started his career on the app Vine before creating his Youtube channel in 2015. Dobrik currently has 14.3 million subscribers and 6.32 million on his second account where he posts bloopers. David’s vlog format is essentially diaristic, emphasizing a style that collects and sews together in a Vine-like style of quick jump cuts, a montage of small moments shared between friends throughout the week. Each video is formatted in the same way with a freeze frame intro of a black screen with his name, vlog number, and date. The font and accompanying music for the intro has remained exactly the same for five years. The title of each of the videos are sarcastic, mocking clickbait culture, “MY FIRST CAR ACCIDENT CAUGHT ON CAMERA”, “BEST FRIEND CONFESSES FEELINGS FOR ME!!”, “WE DID THIS WHILE HE WAS SLEEPING!!”. Paired with his consistency of posting 2-3 times a week, the vlog as a whole feels like a catalogue of memories archiving the everyday. The moments are of course handpicked by David, but are representative of his group of friends which call themselves “The Vlog Squad”.

David is not conversational with his viewers but instead brings them along to see life from his point of view. In the vlog, David is often made fun of by his friends for carrying around

the camera wherever he goes. He spends hours and hours gathering enough footage before whittling it down to a small four minutes and twenty seconds. And while David presumably seems to be recording the everyday, capturing footage of he and his friends going throughout their day, the intention is clear-- to collapse the space between the ordinary and extraordinary to create what is essentially a hyperreality.

Oddities, Pranks, and Stunts

A core element of David Dobrik's vlog is his inclusion of oddities, pranks, and stunts. By forcing his close group of friends to engage with the unconventional activities and characters, the everyday world as he presents it is altered into something that is both shocking and outrageous. The success of these segments that viewers find so satisfying are the pure, uninhibited emotions that naturally arise while recording. As I've mentioned before, this is what Grindstaff calls the "the money shot", when ordinary people display authentic emotion on camera. This display of emotion is thus deemed outstandingly authentic because of its direct opposition to the actor or media professional who is trained to contort their face into a cocktail of fake expressions. This sliver of almost primal honesty that Dobrik captures is also why the vlog has lured in such a large and loyal Gen Z fanbase. When Vlog Squad members are recorded expressing their genuinely natural reactions, viewers are connected to the stranger's true embodied reality. And so in a Gen Z fashion, viewers are consuming what feels like the utmost truth. The success of this relationship can also explain the recent phenomenon of "reaction videos," which could easily include Dobrik's work. As Sam Anderson writes in the New York Times, reaction videos "allow

us to experience, at a time of increasing cultural difference, the comforting universality of human nature.”⁵⁹

Dobrik is purposely looking to hire talent that can interact with his group of friends to create the effect of what feels like a circus. A recurring character featured on Dobrik’s vlog is the pop-culture famous magician, David Blaine, whose website labels him as “Magician & Endurance Artist”. He’s usually shown casually socializing with the Vlog Squad at Dobrik’s own home, blending in with the crowd until he whips out one of his many tricks such as sewing his mouth shut with a needle and thread as seen on the second channel.⁶⁰ The video where Blaine sews his mouth shut shows the Vlog Squad members circling Blaine, rowdy and stunned by what feels like a party trick. They touch him and play with the leftover needle and thread hanging out of his skin while inserting their own quick witty one liners to the situation. The camera focuses on the Vlog Squad member’s reactions as much as it focuses on Blaine, allowing viewers to feel as though they’re still connected to the situation’s group dynamic. As the trick continues to unravel, the members assist him by choosing a card and cutting the sewn mouth open before Blaine spits out the very same card they had chosen. Blaine then finishes off with swallowing the needle and pulling it out of his belly button. This sort of “classic” magician type trick is a repetitive element in Dobrik’s vlogs. Other instances of this on Dobrik’s vlog include Blaine’s sword swallowing skills where he eats glass and makes a frog appear out of mouth. Although the entire segment is showing a crazy magic trick, the emphasis of the video is still on the reaction of the members.

⁵⁹ Anderson, Sam. “Watching People Watching People Watching.” The New York Times. The New York Times, November 25, 2011. <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/27/magazine/reaction-videos.html>.

⁶⁰ Dobrik, David. “WE DIDNT WANT YOU TO SEE THIS!! MORE BLOOPERS!!” Youtube. David Dobrik Too, November 23, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yA8BF_ThJxA&feature=youtu.be.

Another consistent oddity that Dobrik includes in his vlogs are wild animals. He usually tells his friends to lay down and close their eyes until an animal is placed either on top of them or near them. So far, he has brought in flying squirrels, kangaroos, skunks, tarantulas, alligators, baby bears, and a ten foot snake. The friends are shown either horrified and squirming from a live animal on top of them, or enraged and scared that there's a wild animal roaming around their apartment. What's important to note during these segments, is that the animal is always brought into the domestic space of the friend. The surprise and its oddity take place in the universally intimate setting of one's home, which further re-emphasizes the vlog's depiction of mundane everyday life. By depicting pranks within the personal home of Vlog Squad members, viewers feel as though they are being welcomed into a private space. Not only that, but it is the private space in which one lives out the mundane aspects of everyday life. The home is where we eat, sleep, and all the rote tasks one carries out to sustain life. It's not usually a space for a skunk or kangaroo to run rampantly within.

Professional or Amateur?

It's no coincidence that the majority of the most popular vloggers live in Los Angeles, a city where aspiring actors run away to in hopes of making it big one day in the entertainment industry. Dobrik, who resides in L.A., revealed that he had always wanted to be a late night talk show host or work in the film industry in one way or another. Other members in the "Vlog Squad" come from backgrounds in comedy or acting. The main quality of a vlog's performance is its extemporaneous delivery, an easy performance when you're a trained actor with improv

skills. By virtue of living in L.A. and socializing in the same spaces as traditional mainstream celebrities, an essential part of David's vlog is featuring stars such as Justin Bieber, Kylie and Kendall Jenner, Snoop Dogg, Jennifer Lopez, Courtney Cox, Miranda Cosgrove, and Madison Beer. Some are his friends while others are clearly business relationships. But the business move is clear—by simply positioning himself to be in the same spaces and overall realm as these traditional celebrities, the vlog and its everyday reality is transformed just by virtue of its association with traditional celebrities. In a way, they become “verified” by the sacred seal of celebrity.

However, David Dobrik not only appears to be socializing with celebrities, but also has participated in productions created by traditional media institutions. So far, in addition to creating and appearing in his own vlogs, Dobrik has also been featured as character in the children's animated film *The Angry Birds Movie 2*, a co-host at the Teen Choice Awards, and as a judge on Nickelodeon's show *America's Most Musical Family*⁶¹. While this doesn't seem like an impressionable résumé, it's important to remember that this is not indicative of Dobrik's cultural reach or impact. He is a professional vlogger, not a professional actor. While the two are both professional entertainers, the actor's goal is to collect roles and accolades within the hierarchy of the film industry while the vlogger's goal is to ensure authenticity and belief in their depiction of “reality” and everyday life. They both employ the same artillery of performative mechanisms such as physical expressiveness, controlling one's voice, and improvisation. But while the professional actor creates work that is advertised as fictive, the vlogger's is promoted

⁶¹ Tanzer, Myles. “Meet David Dobrik, Gen Z's Jimmy Fallon.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones & Company, March 12, 2020.
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/david-dobrik-interview-youtube-liza-fallon-vlog-11584028115?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1>.

as an illustration of reality. David even uses actors in his vlogs, hiring extras often to create his own made-up situations and scenes. For example, when trying to convince his friend of an imminent earthquake, he hired 30 actors to appear as though they were frantically trying to leave the neighborhood.⁶²

Dobrik, like many vloggers, lure in viewers with their status as the antithesis to the traditional celebrity industry. But Dobrik's involvement with large institutional powers such as Nickelodeon and Columbia Picture indicates that he is still a professional entertainer. Dobrik even locates himself within this industry as well, saying "whether it's doing a TV show, hosting a radio show, I just really want to stay in this business."⁶³ Like many actors, models, and professional entertainers, Dobrik also has a manager. Jack Reed, who had signed Dobrik at the start of his career is the co-founder and CEO of Millennium Entertainment. The company describes itself as a talent agency based out of Los Angeles that "specializ[es] in connecting today's leading brands with innovative talent to create powerful influencer marketing campaigns."⁶⁴ Their website boasts about having a large network to film industry professionals, even offering production services that provide all talent with their own film crew to make anything "from Instagram sketches to national commercial-quality productions."⁶⁵ So while vlogs strive to appear effortless, there are large sums of money and companies propelling the seemingly amateur content. Dobrik is up front in his interviews, often talking about how all the money made from the vlogs must be reinvesting back into the videos for its multitude of expenses. The pranks, oddities, and stunts that are so essential to the vlog, while occurring in the

⁶² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MetiR_00zTo

⁶³ Griffin, Louise. "David Dobrik Chats Life with the Vlog Squad and How Far He'd Go for a Video." Metro. Metro.co.uk, June 20, 2019. <https://metro.co.uk/2019/06/20/david-dobrik-chats-life-vlog-squad-youtuber-burnout-far-go-video-10020138/>.

⁶⁴ "About." Millennium Entertainment. Accessed April 28, 2020. <https://millentertainment.com/about/>.

⁶⁵ "About." Millennium Entertainment. Accessed April 28, 2020. <https://millentertainment.com/about/>.

setting of everyday life, are not casual activities that can be reproduced at home. They are planned out and often require a lot of funding.

Online, Dobrik's viewers are often commenting their suspicion as to whether or not the vlog is scripted. "We don't write jokes or anything, the furthest we'll go is we'll repeat certain jokes for the camera"⁶⁶ David says. In behind the scenes videos, David is seen holding a camera and assuming the role of a director. For one skit, he's giving a group of extras directions on where to move and how. And he'll reshoot it as many times as possible until he gets the clip just right.⁶⁷ Julia Alexander calls it the first "sitcom-vlog", calling it the Youtube version of *Friends*. As Alexander observes, "There are musical transitions, a returning cast of characters that drive the story forward."⁶⁸ The ensemble of his friends are what holds the vlogs together, making it the key component in why viewers feel such a strong connection to the vlog. One not only feels as if they are hanging out with the group, but that they know each of the characters really well. On Dobrik's vlog, each Vlog Squad member plays a caricature of themselves by focusing on one or two core traits to augment. Jeff Witteck is the group's ex-convict, Corrina Kopf is the sexually promiscuous one, and Zane Hijazi is the reckless drunk. Numerous skits and jokes stem from these two dimensional seeming caricatures, furthering their roles as fixed identities to be performed

⁶⁶ Griffin, Louise. "David Dobrik Chats Life with the Vlog Squad and How Far He'd Go for a Video." Metro. Metro.co.uk, June 20, 2019. <https://metro.co.uk/2019/06/20/david-dobrik-chats-life-vlog-squad-youtuber-burnout-far-go-video-10020138/>.

⁶⁷ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWHivpOQ_mQ&t=464s

⁶⁸ Tanzer, Myles. "Meet David Dobrik, Gen Z's Jimmy Fallon." The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, March 12, 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/david-dobrik-interview-youtube-liza-fallon-vlog-11584028115?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1>.

Editing Style

Each of David Dobrik's vlogs are a high energy montage curated and condensed into a high energy four minutes and twenty seconds. "Let's say you're watching a bit and you don't even like it, or you don't think it's funny. That's OK because it'll be over in 10 seconds and something new will start."⁶⁹ Dobrik says. Dobrik's heavy usage of jump cuts to create the fast paced, chaotic energy of his vlog can be traced back to his background on the application Vine and the technological limitations of that time period. Vine was an application only to be used on smartphones where users were constrained to six seconds of video, which would then be looped endlessly as if it were a GIF. While the time constraint is credited as a reason for the application's creative success, the six second limitation can be explained in the context of cellular video in 2012. This was a time when taking videos with a smartphone was a difficult task and most people were worried about surpassing their cell phone plan's data limit⁷⁰. David Pogue categorizes Vine videos as part of the rise in popularity of "micro videos", that along with GIFs, can be characterized as what he says are short, crude, and jerky despite video science only progressing towards better resolution, higher frame rates, and richer audio. Pogue points to how technical limitations of bandwidth and cell-phone plan costs stood in the way of higher quality videos, but that micro videos worked in that "short video gets the message across but loads

⁶⁹ Tanzer, Myles. "Meet David Dobrik, Gen Z's Jimmy Fallon." *The Wall Street Journal*. Dow Jones & Company, March 12, 2020.
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/david-dobrik-interview-youtube-liza-fallon-vlog-11584028115?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1>.

⁷⁰ Isaac, Mike. "Twitter's 4-Year Odyssey With the 6-Second Video App Vine." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, October 29, 2016.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/29/technology/twitters-4-year-odyssey-with-the-6-second-video-app-vine.html>.

almost instantly and doesn't run up your bill or waste your time."⁷¹ This is exactly like Dobrik's vlog-- high impact without wasting one's time. Vine's effect can also be seen in how is set up in a series of "Set ups" and "punchlines".⁷² Stand up comedian Greg Dean explains this relationship saying that "the setup creates expectation and the punch reveals a surprise."⁷³

David Dobrik edits all his videos himself, spending eight to ten hours condensing around five to six hours of footage down to just four minutes and twenty seconds.⁷⁴ The vlog is mostly filmed from a point of view (POV) shot. POV shots offer an immersive, first-person experience for viewers to feel as if they are really there. As the Youtuber Paddy Galloway notes, his friends are also often shot from the side, rather than straight on. "This brings you closer to the action. You don't just feel like you're being acted to. You feel like you're there in the room and it makes for a much more authentic viewing experience"⁷⁵, Galloway says. Another indispensable aspect of David's vlog is his laughter which acts like a transition between clips. Youtubers Colin and Samir points out, his laughter acts like a laugh track for the vlog as a "TV sitcom reimaged" for contemporary times. As they explain, a sitcom, or situational comedy focuses on a fixed set of characters with a world and having the laughter keeps people engaged and excited for the next thing.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Pogue, David. "The Strange Magic of Micro Movies." *Scientific American* 308, no. 5 (2013): 34-35 .

⁷² "How David Dobrik Manipulates His Friends." Youtube, February 26, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IngGnlaxAs>.

⁷³ Dean, Greg. *Step by Step to Stand-Up Comedy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000.

⁷⁴ Alexander, Julia. "David Dobrik Helped Redefine YouTube Culture Four Years Ago, and People Are Celebrating." *The Verge*. The Verge, July 30, 2019.

<https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/30/20747357/david-dobrik-four-year-anniversary-youtube-vine-vlog-squad>.

⁷⁵ Galloway, Paddy. "Here's Why David Dobrik Is a GENIUS - How He Grew On YouTube." Youtube, February 6, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFhGIsK97dA>.

⁷⁶ *Why David Dobrik Laughs So Much*. Youtube, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fjZSLHvkg14>.

Interactivity & Viewer Engagement

If David Dobrik's vlog is a manipulation of reality that seems so clearly artificial, why does he have such a loyal Gen Z fan base if they prioritize authenticity so much? It's no secret that Dobrik's vlog is a comedic exaggeration of everyday life, considering the obvious effort needed to create such complex and expensive skits. But the objective of Dobrik's vlog was never to be as honest as possible about his personal life. In fact, viewers are left with little to no clues about David's true emotions or inner dialogue. Rather, the objective seems to always come back to inviting the viewer into his friend group to make them feel emotionally invested. With the POV shots that suspend viewers into the virtual reality of Dobrik's vlog, viewers get to feel as though they are a part of the friend group themselves. And the relationships within the friend group are the markedly most authentic part of the vlog. When considering the social ills of Gen Z, physically isolated and interacting as avatars with one another online, it gives a clear framework to understand why Dobrik's vlog is so successful despite its clear status as calculated entertainment. Gen Z doesn't care if they have to repeat jokes or if Dobrik needs to hire professional actors to create a skit. The feeling of inclusivity and community that Gen Z gains from comes with watching the vlog is of paramount importance.

While other vlogs focus on the life of the single individual who owns the vlog, David's vlog focuses on the friend group, their reactions, as well as their group dynamics. In a recent interview with *Paper Magazine*, David explained his success by attributing it to his friend group,

saying “I think people watch because of how genuine our friendship is and how authentic everything we do and say is in our videos, it's just us hanging out, making jokes and trying to make ourselves laugh.” and adds, “I know it sounds cheesy, but I think that's what people enjoy. They like looking at a friend group that they'd want to be a part of.”⁷⁷ As Vlog Squad member Carly Incontro explains in one of her vlogs, the friend group had started out as friends before they had begun filming together.⁷⁸ Although Vlog Squad members are mostly considered Millennials, for Gen Z, these cast of characters seem like peers who they can trust. The viewers are clued into all their inside jokes and begin to understand the nuances of the group's innerworkings.

The Fan as a Character

The main way in which David accomplishes this shared reality between viewer and entertainer is by featuring the fans on the vlog as a recurring character. The appearance of his fans in the “diary entry” breaks down the wall and gives fans both visibility and a voice. Fans appear as everyday encounters on the streets in L.A., at the drive-thru, at a party. And we get to see how David and his friends treat these strangers and fans, informing us of how we too watch at home could also be warmly welcomed into the friend group. And if fans aren't directly put in front of the camera, they try their best to be, stealing a Vlog Squad member Jeff Witteck's phone to call another member of the friend group to appear on the vlog saying “Dude I just heard David Dobrik laugh bro!”. However, David's involvement of fans in his video seems to also work as a

⁷⁷ Song, Sandra. “David Dobrik Gets a Style Overhaul.” *PAPER*, PAPER, 7 Mar. 2020, www.papermag.com/david-dobrik-transformation-2645259610.html.

⁷⁸ “WHY DAVID DOBRIK IS BETTER THAN JAKE PAUL.” Youtube, August 18, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kf90Jl84nCw>.

strategy for luring in potential fans by convincing those not yet acquainted with the vlog that he is indeed famous. The fans are not shown as equals having a normal conversation with the Vlog Squad, but are fanning out. They chase after David, and are shown screaming and sometimes even crying. Fans aren't featured in moments of much dignity but it works to reinforce David and the Vlog Squad's status as leaders of what feels like a movement. And so the very thing that works to include his viewers, is what also distances themselves in order to maintain a boundary and sense of otherness.

Spontaneous Acts of Generosity

In his book, "The Brilliant Randomness of Everyday Life", Nicholas Rescher says luck is a "formidable and ubiquitous factor" in human life that is inescapable and extends beyond our cognitive control. No matter how hard we try to plan out our future, luck and chance opportunities are unpredictable as they follow and form our life from the moment we're born until we die.⁷⁹ Luck creates drama out of the everyday which is exactly what Dobrik does in his vlogs. One vlog shows him at a college giving out laptops to random students on campus or even surprising them with huge amounts of money to help with tuition. In another, Dobrik surprises a fan who says he's been living on the streets an entire year of free burritos at Chipotle and then when he thinks that's all, surprises him again with a car and new clothes. To be featured on the vlog almost seems as though one has won their 15 seconds of fame, but it's not the only thing that's given away to fans. One of the earliest examples of reality television called *Queen for a*

⁷⁹ RESCHER, NICHOLAS. "INTRODUCTION." In *Luck: The Brilliant Randomness Of Everyday Life*, 3-18. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995.

Day aired in 1945 as a game show in which women compete for big prize giveaways with stories of their hardships. After each woman reveals what they would want, the contestant with the most applause was awarded with what they wished for as well as items from companies that sponsored the show. *Strike It Rich* was another early reality TV show that aired in the late 40's that appeared with a similar theme in which those in need of money could win big bucks by answering simple questions. The big prize game show genre has been around for a while with contemporary examples being *Jeopardy*, *Deal or no Deal*. The big prize game show genre is an age old trope within reality television still employed today as we see on Dobrik's vlog. It's a vital part of the vlog, appearing in almost every "episode" where he sets up chance situations for people to win huge amounts of money. The giveaway game show uses basic psychology to create a form of entertainment that combines goodwill, luck, thrill. The "instant win" aspect when a participant beats all odds in what feels like a gamble gives both the winner and viewers immediate gratification

Endorsements

Since the majority of Dobrik's vlogs are not PG, Youtube will demonetize many of his videos. Even though David is currently reeling in 40 times as many viewers as when he first started, he's making less money than before.⁸⁰ This forces him to rely on other sources of income through private contracts with Seat Geek, Chipotle, and the applications Honey and Bumble. His partnership with the online ticket vendor Seatgeek funded Dobrik's recurring segment of the

⁸⁰ "David Dobrik Tells All In This Exclusive Interview." Youtube. The Tom Ward Show, April 10, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31tyNOCzR8A>.

vlog that allowed him to give away 19 luxury cars to his friends. With David's super fast reading of the advertisement's pitch and the recurring appearance of the brand's representative, "Ian from SeatGeek", Seatgeek is incorporated into the vlog in a way that matches the humor of Dobrik. As Myles Tanzer points out, David's ultra fast reading of the Seatgeek advertisement has even become a meme, spawning a trend amongst his viewers who they recorded themselves repeating the advertisement as fast as him. As Seatgeek says "While our goals, like other brands, have been to increase brand awareness and sales, we recognized from the onset that you can't approach the influencer space like traditional media. Authenticity is paramount, even if that means going against traditional marketing logic. Nowhere is the success of this strategy more apparent than with YouTube star David Dobrik."⁸¹

According to Dobrik, he only receives \$1,089 a month from YouTube. And while he's morphed an entire brand into a character on his show, somehow watching even what's supposed to be advertising becomes entertaining. I'm not sure if this sort of insidious advertising that seeps into pleasure is worse than traditionally self-evident advertisement that maintains its boundaries. The fact that David Dobrik's partnership with Seatgeek had kids memorizing and repeating its advertisement on their social media accounts is somewhat distressing. The self read ad was a feat celebrated by the Wall Street Journal⁸² and Business Insider.⁸³ But despite his brand deals and

⁸¹ "SeatGeek x David Dobrik: Becoming a Member of the Vlog Squad - The Shorty Awards." The Shorty Awards - Honoring the best of social media. Accessed May 4, 2020.

<https://shortyawards.com/12th/seatgeek-x-david-dobrik-becoming-a-member-of-the-vlog-squad>.

⁸² Ives, Nat. "WSJ | How SeatGeek Wins on YouTube.pdf." Google Drive. Google. Accessed May 4, 2020.

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1p32gvND66aW_Swf0Y3Uuj67_bQ9hx7uU/view.

⁸³ Perelli, Amanda. "Fans of YouTube Star David Dobrik Are Sharing Videos of Themselves Reading a SeatGeek Ad While Seemingly Loopy from Drugs Following Dentist Visits." Business Insider. Business Insider, July 17, 2019. <https://www.businessinsider.com/youtube-star-david-dobrik-fans-recreate-seatgeek-ad-dentist-drugs-2019-7>.

private contracts, Dobrik's intentions never seemed based on financial prospects.⁸⁴ As he says, “If you’re in it for the money, there is no way you will ever make it! Never. That’s not going to get you there at all. I just made fun video with my friends. That’s the key.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Tanzer, Myles. “Meet David Dobrik, Gen Z's Jimmy Fallon.” The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, March 12, 2020.
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/david-dobrik-interview-youtube-liza-fallon-vlog-11584028115?mod=searchresults&page=1&pos=1>.

⁸⁵ Ward, Tom. Forbes. Forbes Magazine, April 10, 2019.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomward/2019/04/10/david-dobrik-never-stops-working/#2b52cb5d37f2>.

Chapter 3: Jake Paul--“It’s Everyday Bro.”

Jake Paul, 22 is a hugely popular Youtuber with 19 million followers known for his stunts and pranks who like David Dobrik, found his start on Vine. Similar to David, Jake Paul’s success comes from his ability to leverage the everyday world as his vlog’s main theme, with his slogan (which he calls a movement) literally being “It’s everyday bro”. His following, “Jake Paulers” as he calls his fans, are the youngest of Gen Z and are usually between the ages of 8-14. By honing in on Generation Z’s penchant for honesty as its authenticity factor, Jake does not hide from his fans but rather welcomes them into his everyday life, even making his home address public. His 500 consecutive daily vlogs in 2018 made him as he says, the fastest growing channel on Youtube within a 500 day period. And while Jake Paul seems like an in-your-face obnoxious vlogger, he’s a savvy businessman with a clear understanding of social media algorithms and how to fuel all the publicity needed to craft the modern celebrity figure of today. Jake has been able to manipulate and warp mundane everydayness into a large scale production worth millions of dollars through outrageous pranks, stunts, and well calculated controversies-- which include multiple fake marriages. And while the crux of his success has relied on the Youtube vlogging aesthetic, which promises honest and brutally uncut slices of everyday life, Jake has exploited this premise to create something that is close to reality television and like David Dobrik, something that is *hyperreal*.

Diary-like

Jake's vlogs are consistently uploaded to be a diaristic account of his everyday life which function, like David's, as a catalogue of memories and his life's journey thus far. And while his vlogs are smattered with stunts and pranks, the videos as a whole from start to finish are driven by the linear progression of him going throughout a single day in his life. Paul spends right hours a day filming.⁸⁶ Although there is usually a stunt or prank functioning as the climax of the video/day, it is presented as only a fragment of the day. The larger narrative which follows Jake's day at large allows for the unusual stunt or prank to be seamlessly incorporated and understood as just another part of his daily life. Jake is usually holding the camera to his face, selfie style, directly addressing the viewer during in-between transition moments of his day. Whereas David's vlog is full of disorienting jump cuts which create a montage of a week's worth of climaxes, Jake's vlogs are longer and are filled with trailing small talk that has little relevance to the prank or stunt advertised in the title. Even though the video moves at a slower pace, working within the smaller scope of a single day creates a clear plot progression in his video in which viewers are suspensefully waiting as the day inches towards the day's prank/stunt.

Pranks & Stunts

Although Jake Paul is famously known for being obnoxious, his early vlogs six years ago in 2014 start out pretty innocently. They show a 17 year old Jake in the suburbs of Ohio fooling

⁸⁶ *Jake Paul Plans To Be Youtube's First Billionaire (HBO)*. Youtube. Vice News, 2017. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZV2x2fpdpg>.

around like any other teenage-- lip syncing to pop songs, dancing in the car with his brother, showing viewers his bedroom that he just cleaned. But even in the early days you can see a sort of confidence in him that just doesn't seem apprehensive to public attention, crowds, or strangers whatsoever. He not only filmed himself within the comfort of his own home, but would go out into the streets and engage with complete strangers through pranks or whatever impromptu public disturbance he decided to stir up. And while the majority of Jake's vlogs are still to this day in a daily vlog format--where he is, who he's hanging out with, what he's eating-- his allure are the stunts and pranks that he incorporates into what he shows viewers as his everyday life. His first prank video titled "Spongebob Pineapple Prank" shows him walking around the streets of a shopping center asking strangers to help him get his friend Spongebob out of the pineapple he's holding. His second prank video, "Dead Body Delivery Prank-Jake Paul", shows him asking passersby to help him move a box from which his brother Logan then spills out of, smeared in fake blood as he plays dead. Both videos are filmed in a surveillance style in which the people he interacts with are unknowingly filmed from afar, making their reactions not just a depiction but an honest record of what actually happened. However, these early beginnings start out tame and harmless in comparison to Jake's antics which escalate over the duration of his time in Los Angeles.

Days before getting fired from his role on the Disney Channel show "Bizaardvark," Jake Paul was featured on the local L.A. news for a public nuisance lawsuit filed against him by his neighbors. The West Hollywood neighborhood street has become the backdrop for Jake's vlog where he not only films dangerous stunts but welcomes groups of his swarming fans after making his home address public. After showing clips of the vlog in which Jake and his friends

had set ablaze a pile of furniture in his empty backyard pool (the flames were higher than his house), the news report cuts to an interview with Jake. At first he's busy-- running through the crowds of fans in front of his house so he can climb atop the new station's van to film content for his own vlog. "They say that you've created a living hell, that it's like a circus" the news anchor says. Jake responds with "Well, people like going to circuses right?", before going on to mention how strong his army of "Jake Paulers" are. The circus is a good analogy for Jake Paul's vlog. His content is neither comedic nor is it a dry telling of his day's activities. Instead, it is a theatrical spectacle performed by entertainers (Jake and his friends) with goals of visually provoking their viewers. Today, Paul has moved onto more dangerous pranks using taser guns on his friends⁸⁷, showcasing special tricks with guns, and jumps over a full speed lamborghini heading directly towards him. In another vlog he duct tapes his then girlfriend to a wall and leaves her there until he comes back to fire a leaf blower in her face. These pranks, although meant to serve the same purpose as David of turning the everyday into a spectacle, are nonetheless more aggressive and teetering on the edge of life or death situations.

Editing Style

Unlike David Dobrik's short and fast paced vlogs, Jake Paul creates long, drawn out vlogs that are full of memes and sound effects. Whereas Dobrik mostly uses POV shots that make the viewer feel as though they were experiencing life from his point of view, Paul usually spends the majority of his vlogs talking directly into the camera, or has other people film his

⁸⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IBweMafSV9E>

interactions with other people. So while Dobrik's effect is to invite the viewer into the vlog's experience, Paul creates more distance between him and the viewer by acknowledging their presence. Although it may sound like a contradiction, it is by acknowledging the viewer that Paul makes his vlog seem more like a performance oriented for the viewer's pleasure. As one can observe in his vlogs, he has hired numerous camera people to shoot his pranks and stunts from different angles. So, each time a stunt or prank is filmed the viewer can watch not only Jake's reaction, but the reaction of all people involved. In addition to providing different angles and reactions for each stunt/prank, Paul adds dramatic effect by frequently repeating clips in slow motion. The repetition of clips in slow motion creates a certain "tough guy" image for Paul, as it tells the viewer to reflect on just how crazy he and his pranks are.

An important aspect to Jake's video editing, which he hires someone else for, is the insertion of other digital imagery either on top of or in between the filmed footage. An example of this is when he uses his laptop and puts a small recording of screen in the corner so that viewers know what he is looking at. What's more common however, is his use of memes that punctuate and further define what his specific emotions are on camera. Subtitles are also used to emphasize the punchline of jokes or what the intended emotion expressed in his clips are. And despite Paul's numerous videographers that he's hired, the editing and inclusion of memes and digital add ons are used to reemphasize the vlog's authenticity via its amateur aesthetic. As Pernille Rosenlund and Susanne Lisberg Jørgensen write in their analysis of Jake Paul, Paul's editing style emulates MTV's amateur style of using "jump cuts, camera jiggle, swish pans, tilted framing, [and] eccentric cropping."⁸⁸ And so while his hired videographers are able to capture

⁸⁸ Rosenlund, Pernille, and Susanne Lisberg Jørgensen. "Everyday, Bro? Authenticity and Performance Intersections in the Vlogs of Jake Paul." *Otherness: Essays and Studies* 6, no. 1 (December 2018).

perfectly panned out shots of, for example him riding dirt bikes⁸⁹ Jake Paul will usually hold a camera that he seems to purposely jiggle and tilt to create the feeling of chaos and amateurism. But, a crucial aspect to this amateur filmmaking is the fact that although each vlog is supposed to represent a single day, so much is left out with each jumpcut. In effect, “the vlogs portray a better perhaps more aesthetically pleasing version of Paul’s real life, blending the real and virtual world into a hyperreality.”⁹⁰

Social Engagement

Community building is an essential element to social media entertainment that essentially proves the vlog’s authenticity. By forming an intimate social bond with the viewer, a vlog’s content is inevitably charged with emotion, trust, and consequently belief. While Dobrik’s videos surround his friends called the “Vlog Squad”, Paul’s vlog had originally consisted of “Team 10” members from 2017-2018. While the Vlog Squad emerged from what was already a pre-existing friend group, Team 10 was a social media incubator run by Paul. So while Dobrik’s invited viewers into the dynamics of what is true friendship in real life, the characters in Paul’s vlog were constantly changing according to Paul’s recruitment. As Paul explains, “I had this theory where I could replicate what Dr. Dre did in the music industry in the social media business. And I set out to put it to the test...found these kids online...they had 30,000 followers, then I flew them out to LA and taught them how to do things on social media. In 2 weeks they grew from

⁸⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PghD4nSYrO8>

⁹⁰Rosenlund, Pernille, and Susanne Lisberg Jørgensen. “Everyday, Bro? Authenticity and Performance Intersections in the Vlogs of Jake Paul.” *Otherness: Essays and Studies* 6, no. 1 (December 2018).

30,000 to 400,000 and today they have 16 million.”⁹¹ Although Team 10 is over, Jake’s group of friends that appear in his vlogs are never set, nor do viewers get a chance to get to know the supporting characters. His fellow Youtuber brother however, Logan Paul does make a feature in almost all of his videos which provides a familiar social context for his viewers. Another character that viewers become familiar with, while ever changing, is whoever his girlfriend is at the time. Each of relationships have become a huge point of focus, as each girlfriend participates and is present for the majority of Paul’s content.

As Pernille Rosenlund and Susanne Lisberg Jørgensen note, Jake Paul creates “in group” language that make his viewers, which he refers to as “Jake Paulers”, feel part of a community. “How do you market successfully to kids?”⁹² a Vice News anchor asked him. He responded with, “I think you have to be super relatable...They’re smart, they can like weed through what they don’t want.”⁹³ Jake told the New York Times that rather than just using his own natural set of vocabulary, he tries to think of how a junior in high school would talk and what their slang might be. “They use the word ‘savage,’ they use the word ‘lit.’ That isn’t my personal vocabulary. But it comes out on camera,”⁹⁴ he says. But because Paul’s fanbase is even younger than highschool, he often features child Youtubers on his channel as young as six years old. He even created an animated character “Lil Donny Red,” to appear in his vlog as a means of appealing to his young fanbas

⁹¹ Shieber, Jonathan. “Social Media Star Jake Paul Raises \$1 Million to Become a Social Media Mogul.” TechCrunch. TechCrunch, January 17, 2017.

<https://techcrunch.com/2017/01/17/social-media-star-jake-paul-raises-1-million-to-become-a-social-media-mogul/>.

⁹² *Jake Paul Plans To Be Youtube’s First Billionaire (HBO)*. Youtube. Vice News, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZV2x2fpdpg>.

⁹³ *Jake Paul Plans To Be Youtube’s First Billionaire (HBO)*. Youtube. Vice News, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZV2x2fpdpg>.

⁹⁴ Williams, Alex. “How Jake Paul Set the Internet Ablaze.” The New York Times. The New York Times, September 8, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/fashion/jake-paul-team-10-youtube.html>.

Social Positioning: Professional Entertainer?

Rosenlund and Jørgensen observe how Youtubers often thank their audience for “making this possible” which is in reference to their lifestyle that they can now afford through monetizing their videos⁹⁵. It’s this small line that comes with an understanding that YouTubers are essentially paid entertainers. In fact, in Jake’s newer vlogs he even asserts himself as a “professional” within his warning captions. His captions read “Please be warned; under no circumstances should any activities, stunts, or pranks in our content be replicated or attempted in any capacity by any of our viewers. All activities, stunts, or pranks are performed by trained professionals in a controlled environment and are for entertainment purposes only.”⁹⁶ However, Jake has no prior experience or training as a stuntman. He found his start making skits on Vine, got a gig on Disney Channel, and then started making Youtube videos. This warning, while with good intentions of preventing young children from hurting themselves, also serves the very important purpose of positioning himself as a “professional.”

In numerous interviews, Jake Paul talks about how his on camera presence is totally different than his real personality. “Off camera, I’m, like, chill and very laid-back...I don’t know if the word is ‘shy,’ but ‘reserved.’ I’m always thinking,”⁹⁷ he says. And as Rosenlund and Jørgensen observe in a podcast with H3, Jake Paul talks about how the person he plays on camera is in fact just a caricature of himself. On the podcast he says,

⁹⁵ Rosenlund, Pernille, and Susanne Lisberg Jørgensen. “Everyday, Bro? Authenticity and Performance Intersections in the Vlogs of Jake Paul.” *Otherness: Essays and Studies* 6, no. 1 (December 2018).

⁹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HK3D2U1hZP8>

⁹⁷ Williams, Alex. “How Jake Paul Set the Internet Ablaze.” *The New York Times*. The New York Times, September 8, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/fashion/jake-paul-team-10-youtube.html>.

“Jake Paul on camera is like... ‘okay, like, we’re doing this for entertainment’, like, a ton of people are gonna be watching this. Um, it’s telling a story. It’s like a heightened version of, of who I am... ..And then off camera, it’s like, I’m that same person but it’s like, I’m more chill. I kinda just hang out, you know, doing my thing, and like, me and my friends joke around, but it’s not like, loud and in your face [sic].”⁹⁸

In the same podcast, Paul also talks about how his initial aspiration when he had first moved to L.A. at the age of 17 was “to be both traditionally media famous and social media famous because my goal is to be a huge movie star and be doing huge movies”.⁹⁹ He talks about how he needs to make a jump from social media into traditional media, which he explains why he took up the role on Disney Channel.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁸ Rosenlund, Pernille, and Susanne Lisberg Jørgensen. “Everyday, Bro? Authenticity and Performance Intersections in the Vlogs of Jake Paul.” *Otherness: Essays and Studies* 6, no. 1 (December 2018).

⁹⁹ “H3 Podcast #22 - Jake Paul & KTLA Reporter Chris Wolfe.” H3 Podcast #22 - Jake Paul & KTLA Reporter Chris Wolfe. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_faWNnWhcw&t=1948s, August 19, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_faWNnWhcw&t=1948s.

¹⁰⁰ “H3 Podcast #22 - Jake Paul & KTLA Reporter Chris Wolfe.” H3 Podcast #22 - Jake Paul & KTLA Reporter Chris Wolfe. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_faWNnWhcw&t=1948s, August 19, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_faWNnWhcw&t=1948s.

Hyperreality or Hoax? Controversy as Spectacle.

On July 28th of 2019, Jake Paul and Tana Mongeau were married at Las Vegas' Graffiti Mansion where their couple name Jana was spray painted on the house with the hashtag #Janaforever. Attending the wedding were celebrity impersonators such as a fake Bruno Mars and a fake Oprah. Tana was walked down the aisle by her manager. The aisle was swarming with attendees documenting the event. The "priest" held a microphone up for their vows while a big boom microphone dangled on top of Jake. After the "priest" says "you may kiss the bride", and Tana and Jake seal the deal, complete chaos breaks out in the audience. Someone punches Jake during the kiss and the priest gets into a rowdy chaotic fight. The entire wedding was live-streamed on the platform Halogen for \$49.99 and was the guiding theme behind Tana's MTV reality series, "*MTV No Filter: Tana Turns 21*" on Youtube. And then Tana didn't even attend her own honeymoon. Both Jake Paul and Tana Mongeau are Youtubers who have found their fame through a clear and deliberate understanding of what produces the right kind of publicity for a modern celebrity figure. And while it may not seem like it at first glance when watching their content, the two are savvy business people with an obvious self-awareness that controversy can build an entire empire. Tana, 21 is a Youtuber with 4.7 million followers known for her lengthy and often exaggerated clickbait "storytime" videos in which she shares anecdotes from her everyday life. She is mentored by Paris Hilton and...Together, their fake romance and wedding creates a new spectacle to combine and reel in an audience from both sides of their fanbase.

The televised celebrity wedding as a lucrative entertainment spectacle is an age-old trick-- remember Kim Kardashian's 72 day wedding to Kris Humphries? "Kim's Fairytale Wedding: A Kardashian Event" aired in two parts on October 10 and 11 for which more than 8 million people tuned in to. The \$10 million event was a celebrity affair in which people like Serena Williams, Eva Longoria, Kathie Lee Gifford, and Joe Francis of *Girls Gone Wild* attended. The wedding was full of branded sponsors and tabloid exclusives with almost every news show covering the event until 72 days later on Halloween, Kim filed for divorce releasing a statement to the tabloid E! that "I had hoped this marriage was forever, but sometimes things don't work out as planned. We remain friends and wish each other the best". In response, Humphries didn't want a divorce but an annulment as well as a \$7 million payout claiming that the wedding was a PR stunt and based on "fraud". The entire event was a money making scheme that captivated the attention of the entire country. The proposal was broadcasted on an episode of *Keeping Up with The Kardashians*, People Magazine bought their official engagement photos for \$300k, OK! Bought bridal shower photos for \$100k, US weekly bought honeymoon photos for \$30k to \$100k. Then Kim sold the exclusive wedding photos to People for 1.5 million. And although the wedding was supposed to have a total cost of \$10 million, reports showed that Kim and her mother Kris Jenner negotiated for free invitations, a cake, and the custom made \$20,000 Vera Wang dress.¹⁰¹

Both Paul and Mongeau have revealed in interviews of how they aspire towards what the Kardashians have done. "I remember being like 13 years old and literally when the Kardashians

¹⁰¹ Jones, Allie. "Kim Kardashian's 72-Day Marriage Predicted a Future of #Spon Celeb Weddings." Vice, February 13, 2020. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dygd/ba/kim-kardashians-72-day-marriage-to-kris-humphries-predicted-a-future-of-sponsored-celebrity-weddings.

first aired, being like, ‘I am made for [this]. Like I am made for reality TV.’”¹⁰² Jake Paul has even compared his success to the Kardashians, telling the H3 podcast that “Basically anything I do gets picked up in the press. And that’s why the Kardashians are so successful because of all the drama.”¹⁰³ His staged wedding with Mongeau was not even his first. In 2017, Paul had posted a video telling his viewers that he and a member of Team 10 had just gotten married.¹⁰⁴ “We’re not even actually dating...It’s like the WWE. People know that’s fake, and it’s one of the biggest things of entertainment,”¹⁰⁵ he tells the New York Times. And the speculation surrounding the authenticity of their relationship only adds to the attention Mongeau and Paul are looking for. The press had covered the wedding with tabloid titles like “Tana and Jake Say They are FOR REAL”, “Sources Close to Influencer Couple Say Marriage Is Fake”, and “Who The Hell Are Jake Paul and Tana Mongeau Anyway?”¹⁰⁶ The fake wedding controversy had turned people who had never even heard of either influencer into detectives trying to figure out what the truth was. Paul and Mongeau’s wedding is a representative of a growing trend on Youtube that uses exaggeration and deception for views.

¹⁰² Alexander, Julia. “Jake Paul and Tana Mongeau's over-the-Top 'Wedding' Is Part of a Bigger YouTube Phenomenon.” The Verge. The Verge, July 29, 2019.

<https://www.theverge.com/2019/7/29/8934858/jake-paul-tana-mongeau-wedding-mtv-reality-house-youtube>.

¹⁰³ “H3 Podcast #22 - Jake Paul & KTLA Reporter Chris Wolfe.” H3 Podcast #22 - Jake Paul & KTLA Reporter Chris Wolfe.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_faWNnWhcw&t=1948s, August 19, 2017.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_faWNnWhcw&t=1948s.

¹⁰⁴ Paul, Jake. “WE ACTUALLY GOT MARRIED...” Youtube. Youtube, June 19, 2017.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEAmMOHxo08>.

¹⁰⁵ Williams, Alex. “How Jake Paul Set the Internet Ablaze.” The New York Times. The New York Times, September 8, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/fashion/jake-paul-team-10-youtube.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Kircher, Madison Malone. “Jake Paul and Tana Mongeau Getting Married Is Peak Wedding-Industrial Complex.”

Intelligencer. Intelligencer, July 26, 2019.

<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2019/07/jake-paul-and-tana-mongeau-wedding-explained.html>.

Chapter 4: Clickbait Culture & The American Dream

There have been numerous surveys that have found being a “Youtuber” is the most desired profession. The analytics company Harris Poll partnered with Lego to promote an interest in space exploration for 3,000 kids 8-12 in honor of the 50th anniversary of the Apollo 11 Moon Landing. What they found instead, was that three times as many kids in the US and UK aspired to be a Youtuber over an astronaut.¹⁰⁷ Another study conducted by the British firm First Choice showed that 34% out of 1,000 kids between the ages of 6-17 wanted to be a Youtube personality when they grow up.¹⁰⁸ The prospect of being a Youtuber as a legitimate career profession is a growing trend where kids can earn huge amounts of money without any prerequisites of education or training. Because the role of the Youtuber is an amateur creator making videos on a platform available to anyone, the profession seems like an easy way to become both famous, rich, and even creative. But what they don’t realize is that very few can become as successful as say, David Dobrik and Jake Paul. Professor Mathias Bärthel at Offenburg University found that only 96.5 percent of aspiring Youtubers will never make more than \$16,800 per year. As he explains, in order to make a living Youtubers would need to reel in tens of millions of views per month¹⁰⁹, and that’s only if they keep their content PG to avoid demonetization.

¹⁰⁷ S, Tawny. “LEGO Group Kicks Off Global Program To Inspire The Next Generation Of Space Explorers As NASA Celebrates 50 Years Of Moon Landing.” The Harris Poll, July 16, 2019.
<https://theharrispoll.com/lego-group-kicks-off-global-program-to-inspire-the-next-generation-of-space-explorers-as-nasa-celebrates-50-years-of-moon-landing>

¹⁰⁸ Slane, Cassie. “YouTube Career or College? The New Question Facing Teens.” NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, October 16, 2018.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/youtube-career-or-college-new-question-facing-teens-n920581>.

¹⁰⁹ Slane, Cassie. “YouTube Career or College? The New Question Facing Teens.” NBCNews.com. NBCUniversal News Group, October 16, 2018.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/business/business-news/youtube-career-or-college-new-question-facing-teens-n920581>.

Both Dobrik and Paul represent Gen Z's newly refurbished American Dream. Rather than pursuing a college career, both vloggers tell a story of how success is possible without the traditional education system. Their luxurious lifestyles seep into the imagery of both their vlogs, providing their outrageous stunts with a backdrop of glass mansions and expensive cars. But despite their obvious successes, both vloggers remain connected to the viewer as a peer. Not only do they walk and talk to the viewer like someone of the same generation, but both Youtubers share a similar origin story of coming from middle class families in the Midwest. Along with the intimate relationships each vlogger builds, their "normal" backgrounds make them even more relatable to audiences. Dobrik and Paul are 23 years old and have somehow found themselves with large amounts of both financial and cultural capital. Watching their videos, they seem like two kids who just happened to randomly stumble onto millions of dollars, using this fortune for only the most outlandish activities. Their wealth also reflects the material tastes and trends of a new generation. While Dobrik seems constantly undeserving of it, giving it away to charity and his friends, Paul seems to fully embrace it as though it was all part of his plan. Either way, their vlogs represent the American Dream for Gen Z viewers.

A college degree was once thought of as an investment returned in the form of financial independence, a stable future, a large salary. But with student debt and a labor market saturated with college graduates who all have the same credentials, have made a college degree less of a guarantee.¹¹⁰ It makes sense that today, being a Youtube star is the most sought after profession. As higher education is proving itself to be more like a summer camp for the ultra privileged, young people are tapping into a new industry that requires nothing but a social media presence.

¹¹⁰ Leef, George. "Don't Buy The Hype, College Education Is Not An Investment." *Forbes*. *Forbes Magazine*, June 12, 2013. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2013/06/12/dont-buy-the-hype-college-education-is-not-an-investment/#26efc39e5e02>.

The influencer marketing industry is estimated to be worth \$15 billion by 2020, growing rapidly from its \$8 billion in 2019.¹¹¹ “Parents can go years thinking their son or daughter is just an average teen on YouTube or Instagram until one day a marketing manager at a Fortune 500 brand calls the house asking to collaborate”¹¹² Taylor Lorenz writes. But the influencer lifestyle is not only affecting how kids look at college, but how grade-school kids maneuver K-12. And so, although young influencers are making relatable content for their peers, many of them need to be homeschooled in order to keep up with their meetings, schedules, and travel demands. Sometimes, traditional school even creates a situation where “kids may be ostracized or judged by their ‘hometown’ friends” or “cause distractions when they’re mobbed for selfies between classes.”¹¹³

“A genius or a jerk? A punk or a prophet? In a media landscape where clicks are money, does it even matter?”¹¹⁴ Alex Williams asks this in his 2017, New York Times article interviewing Jake Paul. After finding his own success in vlogging, Paul has capitalized off his fame in his new business venture called the “Financial Freedom Movement”, a \$20/ month membership to classes by millionaires, experts, and leaders on “how to achieve financial freedom using social media and the internet.”¹¹⁵ On the main page of the Financial Freedom Movement’s website, Paul writes a mini manifesto in which he criticizes student loans and the “outdated” education system before calling for a generational movement. He talks about how

¹¹¹ Schomer, Audrey. “Influencer Marketing: State of the Social Media Influencer Market in 2020.” Business Insider. Business Insider, December 17, 2019. <https://www.businessinsider.com/influencer-marketing-report>.

¹¹² Lorenz, Taylor. “What It’s Like to Be the Parent of a Social-Media Star.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, January 17, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/01/raising-a-social-media-star/550418/>.

¹¹³ Lorenz, Taylor. “What It’s Like to Be the Parent of a Social-Media Star.” The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, January 17, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/01/raising-a-social-media-star/550418/>.

¹¹⁴ Williams, Alex. “How Jake Paul Set the Internet Ablaze.” The New York Times. The New York Times, September 8, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/08/fashion/jake-paul-team-10-youtube.html>.

¹¹⁵ “Jake Paul.” Jake Paul. Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://financialfreedommovement.com/>.

being an influencer is the key to “living life on your own terms” and achieving freedom.¹¹⁶ Last month he launched FFM with a rally at Hollywood Sports Park with GenZ Holdings Inc., a brand development group directed towards Millennials and Generation Z. The rally was a meet-and-greet where fans could meet Paul and his friends while they held signs that said “School sucks start a YouTube channel today” and “I learned the periodic table but not how to do my taxes. Not awesome!”¹¹⁷ Paul told *Variety* that FFM came out of his own experience and frustrations with school, but that he’s also not entirely anti-education. Instead, he believes in the idea of harnessing the internet to become “self-reliant and self-made.”¹¹⁸

While many people praise the internet for being a democratic space open to everyone’s participation, it has become an overly saturated place where users and aspiring influencers must compete for attention. Youtube’s prank culture can be attributed to the internet’s attention economy where Youtubers are constantly trying to outdo one another in shock value. The competition for attention and millions of dollars has led to an era of desperate clickbait where people will do just about anything for views. It has created an online environment where vloggers turn to lies, exaggeration, hoaxes, and scams for the sake of attention. But as I’ve said before, because of Youtube’s image of amateurism where anyone can upload a video, everything on the platform has the effect of being true. Videos are treated like artefacts reflecting reality, never fictional performances. Fake weddings and pregnancies such as “Jana” and 14 year-old

¹¹⁶ “Jake Paul.” Jake Paul. Accessed May 2, 2020. <https://financialfreedommovement.com/>.

¹¹⁷ Yap, Audrey Cleo. “YouTuber Jake Paul Launches Entrepreneur How-To Platform, Financial Freedom Movement.” *Variety*. *Variety*, February 16, 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/digital/news/youtube-jake-paul-launches-financial-freedom-movement-1203505286/>.

¹¹⁸ Yap, Audrey Cleo. “YouTuber Jake Paul Launches Entrepreneur How-To Platform, Financial Freedom Movement.” *Variety*. *Variety*, February 16, 2020. <https://variety.com/2020/digital/news/youtube-jake-paul-launches-financial-freedom-movement-1203505286/>.

Danielle Cohn's have become a growing phenomenon on social media as their lucrative spectacles succeed by exploiting their audience's penchant to believe. In other instances, some Youtubers buy views and subscribers on their videos to trick large companies into giving them brand deals. And in rare but tragic circumstances, the pursuit towards viral fame on Youtube has even ended in abuse.

One of the most famous Youtube controversies surrounded Jake Paul's brother, Logan who had posted footage of a body in Japan's suicide forest in late December of 2017. And although Youtube's policies prohibit violence and gore, it reached six millions views and was #10 on Youtube's trending list before getting deleted by Paul a day later. Logan Paul begins the video by assuring his viewers that "this is not clickbait," and to "buckle the fuck up, because you're never gonna see a video like this again!"¹¹⁹ He even used a blurred image of the dead body as the video's thumbnail. The video basically is him filming his entire reaction as he encounters the body-- laughing, joking, and even talking to it. "Yo, are you alive?" and "Are you fucking with us?"¹²⁰ While he later said on Good Morning America that the video's intention was "to bring awareness to suicide", the video is tactless and disturbing. The Youtuber PewDiePie chimed in, commenting that "The problem with being a YouTuber or an online entertainer is that you constantly have to outdo yourself... I don't think Logan is necessarily a bad person; I just

¹¹⁹ Romano, Aja. "Logan Paul, and the Toxic YouTube Prank Culture That Created Him, Explained." Vox. Vox, January 3, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/2018/1/3/16841160/logan-paul-aokigahara-suicide-controversy>.

¹²⁰ Romano, Aja. "Logan Paul, and the Toxic YouTube Prank Culture That Created Him, Explained." Vox. Vox, January 3, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/2018/1/3/16841160/logan-paul-aokigahara-suicide-controversy>.

think he really got caught up in that idea that he has to keep pushing himself to get those numbers.”¹²¹

However, Youtube’s prank culture is not only limited to reckless teens. The two parents of the family Youtube channel “FamilyOFive,” formerly “DaddyO5,” were sentenced to five years probation for child neglect and lost custody of their two youngest children after their pranks turned into downright physical and mental abuse.¹²² The channel of 800,000 subscribers had consisted of the two parents, Heather and Michael Martin, who were perpetually looking for reasons to scream at their children with obscene language. The videos are incredibly hard to watch as the vlog flicks back and forth between the father directly yelling into the camera and the reactions of the panic-stricken children. In one video, Michael coerces one of his kids to slap his sister and punishes him for it by pushing him into a bookcase¹²³ while in another he smashes his kids’ xbox with a hammer.¹²⁴ After facing serious backlash, Michael Martin stated that the pranks were “planned” and that “the kids about them.”¹²⁵ It’s clear from the hysterical reactions of the children, that these are neither pranks nor acting. After the couple was court ordered to delete their videos and no longer make videos with their children, they moved to a different state

¹²¹ Alexander, Julia. “YouTube Creators Post Shocking Videos Because YouTube Rewards Dangerous Prank Culture.” Polygon. Polygon, February 1, 2018. <https://www.polygon.com/2018/2/1/16959274/youtube-prank-videos-logan-paul-suicide-forest>.

¹²² Hale, James. “DaddyOFive’ Parents’ Sentences Reduced Despite Allegations They Broke Court Order, Continued To Vlog Children.” Tubefilter, January 11, 2019. <https://www.tubefilter.com/2019/01/11/daddyofive-youtube-sentence-reduced/>.

¹²³ Hamilton, Isobel Asher. “YouTube Shuts down FamilyOFive Channel over ‘Child Endangerment’ Concerns.” Business Insider. Business Insider, July 20, 2018.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/youtube-bans-familyofive-channel-over-child-endangerment-concerns-2018-7>.

¹²⁴ “DaddyOFive Parents Lose Custody ‘over YouTube Pranks’.” BBC News. BBC, May 2, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-39783670>.

¹²⁵ “DaddyOFive Parents Lose Custody ‘over YouTube Pranks’.” BBC News. BBC, May 2, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-39783670>.

so that they could continue making videos from a new channel.¹²⁶ On both occasions, Youtube had promptly shut down both channels, releasing a statement that said, “Content that endangers children is unacceptable to us. We have worked extensively alongside experts in child safety to make sure we have strict policies and are aggressively enforcing them.”¹²⁷

There are numerous stories of pranks gone wrong. But there are also hundreds of vlogs that while less extreme, are packed with emotional reaction content that are still, nonetheless jaw dropping. There are some people who pretend to cheat on their significant other while others, while in others they tell their partner that their child fell off a balcony.¹²⁸ Whatever it is, the prank works to provoke a reaction with an emotional response worth filming. But as Lara Williams writes, “Look through these videos on YouTube, and you'll see that all the perpetrators are men and most of the victims are women.”¹²⁹ What comes to mind for me in relevance to the two vloggers I’ve mentioned in previous chapters, is a vlog in which Jake Paul duct taped his girlfriend to a wall, left her there, and shoved a leaf blower in her face before letting her down. Williams interviews the criminologist Tony Bockley to further understand the psychology between Youtube’s toxic prank culture. Blockley explains the value of creating shock value as a means of attaining status and feeding one’s ego “in a society that rewards aggressive and dominant male behavior”, which he calls “hegemonic masculinity.”¹³⁰ Essentially, pranks are a

¹²⁶ Hamilton, Isobel Asher. “YouTube Shuts down FamilyOFive Channel over 'Child Endangerment' Concerns.” Business Insider. Business Insider, July 20, 2018.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/youtube-bans-familyofive-channel-over-child-endangerment-concerns-2018-7>.

¹²⁷ Hale, James. “DaddyOFive' Parents' Sentences Reduced Despite Allegations They Broke Court Order, Continued To Vlog Children.” Tubefilter, January 11, 2019. <https://www.tubefilter.com/2019/01/11/daddyofive-youtube-sentence-reduced/>.

¹²⁸ Williams, Lara. “What Our Love of Sadistic Pranks Tells Us About Ourselves.” Vice, November 21, 2016. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dpkd3y/why-are-we-so-obsessed-with-scaring-people.

¹²⁹ Williams, Lara. “What Our Love of Sadistic Pranks Tells Us About Ourselves.” Vice, November 21, 2016. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dpkd3y/why-are-we-so-obsessed-with-scaring-people.

¹³⁰ Williams, Lara. “What Our Love of Sadistic Pranks Tells Us About Ourselves.” Vice, November 21, 2016. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dpkd3y/why-are-we-so-obsessed-with-scaring-people.

form of asserting control and dominance over their victim whom they see not as a human but, “as an object for their achievement.”¹³¹ In a way, Youtube has facilitated an ecosystem with a feedback loop that rewards shock value. The more outrageous a prank, the more views and with more views, comes more revenue. But in a saturated platform with increasing competition, the incentive to intensify the shock value only increases.

While outrageous pranks are one way to stand out amongst tough competition, many female Youtubers have turned to “storytime” videos that feature exaggeration and often flat-out lies in the form of a confessional monologue. While not physically dangerous, the allure of these videos is found in the dramatized plots where vloggers emote their reaction to the story. They run the emotional gamut of “I Sexted Someone On Accident”¹³² to “My Roommate Committed Suicide.”^{133, 134} The titles often seem crass and tactless, but are nonetheless meant to function as clickbait so that unknowing users can satiate their curiosity. The incredibly long videos, some even over an hour long, are performed by a single person who speaks directly into the camera in a continuous take that never cuts. The single shot that doesn’t edit out any material gives the performer an added sense of authenticity in proving that their story and emotions are so real that they didn’t need to shoot multiple takes. Jake Paul’s “ex-wife”, Tana Mongeau, and former Vlog Squad member, Trisha Paytas, are popular examples of this kind of video. Watching their videos feel like an incredibly personal experience, like a one-on-one with a close friend who came to

¹³¹ Williams, Lara. “What Our Love of Sadistic Pranks Tells Us About Ourselves.” Vice, November 21, 2016.

https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/dpkd3y/why-are-we-so-obsessed-with-scaring-people.

¹³² https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VbDflnC_OGI

¹³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UAcQ4TTohFs>

¹³⁴ Brown, Emily. “It’s Storytime.” The Outline. The Outline, March 4, 2017.

<https://theoutline.com/post/1189/storytime-youtube-where-people-confess-everything-and-nothing?zd=1&zi=ms5zxwqe>.

confide in you about something that must be kept secret. Nevertheless, these videos generate millions of views with its information open for the public to discuss in the comments.

Conclusion

Whether it's dangerous pranks or in emotional "storytime" videos, vlogs use shock value as a means of emotionally impacting their viewers. The viewer feels a sense of camaraderie with the performer, who gets to feel as though they are part of a community. It's the reason why Dobrik films in first-person and focuses on recording the reactions of Vlog Squad members, even when there's something more outrageous to the left of the shot. And it's the reason behind why Dobrik invested in his social media incubator, Team 10. Relatability, emotional reaction, and community are the key to making the viewer feel as though they're a part of something authentically special. In an article titled "Youtubers Are Not Your Friends", Megan Farokhmaesh talks about the dangers of parasocial relationships between Youtubers and their viewers. Sociologists Richard Wohl and Donald Horton coined the idea in 1965 of how technology has created one-sided and unreciprocated emotional relationships controlled by the entertainer. Wohl and Horton describe the relationships as voluntary relationships that audiences seek out to relate to and know "in somewhat the same way they know their chosen friends."¹³⁵ The problem, as Farokhmaesh describes, is when we give these online celebrities the same amount of trust as we do our friends. As we've seen, the intentions of a vlogger can vary greatly and we should always take into account the potential incentives and intentions behind an image.

Boris Groys argues in the last chapter of his book *In the Flow* that the internet has led to the defictionalization of art. Historically considered fictional disciplines, art and literature have

¹³⁵ Ferchaud, Arianne, Jenna Grzeslo, Stephanie Orme, and Jared Lagroue. "Parasocial Attributes and YouTube Personalities: Exploring Content Trends across the Most Subscribed YouTube Channels." *Computers in Human Behavior* 80 (2018): 88–96. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2017.10.041>.

always functioned and circulated in more traditional mediums and institutions of distribution such as the museum or the theater which allows for the spectator to become totally absorbed in the fictional worlds presented. Groys calls this total dissolution a state of “self-oblivion” and “self-dissimulation,” in which one is able to spiritually leave everyday life and be totally immersed into the reality of the artwork.¹³⁶ However, the only issue is that these fictions are no longer occurring in a different space for which we must leave our homes to consume. The framing of art and media produced on the Internet is bare-- they exist as tiny devices and screens, littering our spaces and attached to our bodies. 70% of Gen Z even sleep with their phone at night.¹³⁷ For Marshall McLuhan, our technologies are an extension of ourselves as though they were an added limb. Movies, artwork, and information is portable and now consumed from the comfort and convenience of wherever we happen to be. There is no ritual of a gallery space or a movie theater that makes it feel as though we’re entering an otherworldly realm. Instead, the portable artwork and content is given a new context that melds in with our everyday life. When we watch a vlogger on the way to work every morning, we knit these online personalities into our daily routines and spaces. But so the question remains-- are the fictions of our digital world leaking into our physical reality? Or is our physical world slowly uploaded online?

I’d like to go back to my introduction where I defined the hyperreal. The hyperreal is when we can no longer distinguish the difference between reality and its representation. It’s a world in which there is no longer can find the original, only copies of copies. The example I had

¹³⁶ Groys, Boris. *In the Flow*. Verso Books, 2018.

¹³⁷ Jr, Bill Murphy. “Millennials and Gen Z Would Rather Text Each Other Than Do This, According to a New Study.” Inc.com. Inc., October 26, 2017. <https://www.inc.com/bill-murphy-jr/millennials-gen-z-prefer-texting-to-human-conversations-new-study-says-plus-5-other-findings.html>.

given was the recent trend of girls getting plastic surgery to look more like Instagram filters. The naturally occurring flesh of a human is manipulated and altered to imitate a digital image that only ever existed online. I'd also like to return to the Slenderman stabbing of 2014 when two young girls, 12 and 15-years old, had stabbed a friend in the woods 19 times after reading about the internet's urban legend of 'Slenderman.' Slenderman is "a mythical creature often depicted as a tall, thin figure wearing a black suit and a blank face" who can "stretch or shorten his arms at will and has tentacle-like appendages protruding from his back."¹³⁸ The fictional character originated in 2009 when Eric Knudson submitted two fake photographs of a "tall sinister figure lurking behind groups of children"¹³⁹ to the website "Something Awful's" thread called "Create Paranormal Images."¹⁴⁰ The thread consisted of a culture in which users would alter photos on Photoshop to pass off their urban legends as real. Five years later, two sixth graders packed their bags and headed North into Wisconsin's Nicolet national forest where they planned to kill their friend and find the mansion of Slenderman.¹⁴¹

Of course, the vlogs of Dobrik's and Paul's vlogs have not resulted in the dark fate as the Slenderman Stabbing. But what they do share is the creation and simulation of an alternative reality for viewers to become absorbed in. Each vlogger has their own intention. For Dobrik, the intended effect is clearly comedic while Paul seems more concerned with creating a business

¹³⁸ Parkinson, Justin. "The Origins of Slender Man." BBC News. BBC, June 11, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27776894>.

¹³⁹ Parkinson, Justin. "The Origins of Slender Man." BBC News. BBC, June 11, 2014. <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-27776894>.

¹⁴⁰ Mar, Alex. "Into the Woods: How Online Urban Legend Slender Man Inspired Children to Kill." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, December 7, 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/dec/07/slender-man-into-the-woods-how-an-online-bogeyman-inspired-children-to-kill>.

¹⁴¹ Mar, Alex. "Into the Woods: How Online Urban Legend Slender Man Inspired Children to Kill." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, December 7, 2017.

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/dec/07/slender-man-into-the-woods-how-an-online-bogeyman-inspired-children-to-kill>.

empire. Dobrik fans seem to be self aware and clued in to the fact that the vlog is a like full on, costly production that often stages its events. Paul fans, on the other hand, are often deceived and told to follow false narratives (like Paul's fake wedding) as a means to create more revenue and fame for Paul. Despite these opposing objectives between the vloggers, the method through which they create their desired effect and lure in such large and faithful fanbases is by cultivating a relationship with their viewers that seems authentic. Viewers do not care if these vlogs are depicting an accurate representation of the true humdrum of daily life. What seems to be the overarching theme that remains of utmost value to these vlogs, are unbridled and raw emotions. It doesn't matter if they had to pay \$1,000 to bring a baby bear into their bedroom or if their pranks come from a week's worth of methodical planning. People watch these vlogs to see their reactions. We often think of emotions as bestial, a sign of low intelligence or something to be embarrassed about and kept under control.

I decided to interview Gen Z students for anecdotes of what it means to juggle both the physical and digital world. Student A is a 22 year old studying nursing at the New York City College of Technology. He mainly watches vlogs with an emphasis on rural lifestyles and talked about how these online personalities influence everything from the food he eats, his travels, to even his dreams. But when it comes to representing himself online, he talked about how social media gave him the ability to create multiple accounts as outlets to express different sides of his personality. "When I'm online, I can be more than one person, which is a cool thing because you can be part of different tribes and groups of people" he says. Student A also talked about the role that digital editing tools played in his online representation. "After I die, this will be my only

legacy...so it's important to put effort into it." He began using applications like Airbrush and Facetune to see what he would look like with plastic surgery and started using it to fix his imperfections. Despite the negative effects this had on his mental health, he said it was through this that he found an interest in a new aesthetic. "I like this creepy and artificial aesthetic of looking like a bot and have actually incorporated it into my aesthetic as a robot creature. That's why I have some usernames that are random number sequences and post really generic photos of flowers." When I asked him if these avatars were supposed to be an honest representation of himself he replied with, "It's like the olden days though, when people had portraits done of them. Those were never realistic either."

Student B is 22 and a student at Parsons School of Design studying Design and Technology. She mostly watched vlogs that pertain to her own interests of interior design and fashion but also talked about how it was important these vlogs were informal. Without having to follow a long, complicated plot, she can just put on a vlog and make it feel as though someone was there, keeping her company while she does housework. She also talked about how she liked being updated on their lives and keeping up with what the online personalities are doing. When it came to managing her own presence on social media, she said there hasn't been a single thing she does that she doesn't document. She also observed that when socializing, she tries to make sure that it's a representation of how she imagines her online persona would act. Student C is 20 and studies Chemistry at Bard College. She talked about how she used the internet as a means of escape to find connections and content at a time when she felt disconnected from her

conservative surroundings. She described the vlogs she watches as having an “intrigue factor” of people who had lives completely different than her own

Person D is 24 and a musician from Austin, Texas. He grew up watching and participating in a subculture of “scene” vloggers online who had shared a similar sense of humor and aesthetic to him. He said he doesn’t look up to any vloggers right now, but that they had definitely influenced him when he was younger. Now, social media and particularly Instagram plays a prominent role in how he navigates his own art. He’s talked about being torn between sharing everything about his life online and trying to cultivate a sense of mystery. But his decision to shroud his online persona with mystery, he explains, comes from trying to emulate one of his favorite artists growing up. This artist, he says, was an elusive figure whose life was extremely private. It created a situation where it only garnered more interest and attention amongst fans by letting them create a fantasy version of the person behind the music. Part of the allure for Person D was also that the music was no longer bound to the physical world. But it was when the artist had started livestreaming on Instagram and telling jokes to the public that Person D had become disenchanted. “His livestreams made me bored of him. It’s not the same. I feel like he threw everything down the drain. I stopped listening to his music as much because the character I had built up in my mind was gone.”

In *Dispersion*, Seth Price offers the internet as a new utopian system for which “non-art” can enter an arena of distribution and dialogue without the institutional framing of the conventional art world. He looks at Duchamp, who had once said that “the artist of the future is

underground” before attempting to sell his Rotorelief optical toys at an amateur inventor’s fair. What Price argues is that today’s artist is in fact, not an artist at all. They are not academically trained artists nor are they acknowledged by museums or journals. The avant-garde of today lies outside the radar of the traditional structures of what is thought to belong in “the art world”, but engages in, as the philosopher Sarat Maharaj says, “...works, events, spasms, ructions that don’t look like art and don’t count as art, but are somehow electric, energy nodes, attractors, transmitters, conductors of new thinking, new subjectivity and action that visual artwork in the traditional sense is not able to articulate.”¹⁴² A 2005 study by the Pew Internet and American Life project shows that half of all American teens could be considered media creators.¹⁴³ I can only imagine what that statistic would look like today. Last June in 2019, Snapchat worked with the analytics research group J. Wunderman Thompson Intelligence to create a report on the “habits, influence, and expectations”¹⁴⁴ of Gen Z, or “the Next Generation of Super Creatives” as they call them.¹⁴⁵ As Molly Logan tells JWT Intelligence about Gen Z,

Unlike any generation before them, they’ve grown up expressing themselves online...They’re expressing very complex thoughts, very personal ones—we see them with their emotions in a really raw, revealing

¹⁴² Price, Seth. *Dispersion*, 2007.

¹⁴³ Jenkins, Henry. “Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture,” 2009.

¹⁴⁴ Group, The Innovation. “New Trend Report: Into Z Future.” Wunderman Thompson Intelligence, June 19, 2019. <https://intelligence.wundermanthompson.com/2019/06/new-trend-report-into-z-future/>.

¹⁴⁵ https://assets.ctfassets.net/inb32lme5009/5DF1qKVGldmAu7X6btfGQt/44fdca09d7b630ee28f5951d54feed71/Into_Z_Future_Understanding_Gen_Z_The_Next_Generation_of_Super_Creatives_.pdf

way on social media. But whatever they're doing, whether it's a caption or a comment, it's always tethered to something that's visual and creative.¹⁴⁶

What each Gen Zer I interviewed shared in common with one another was the idea that a higher degree of human connection can be achieved through the construction of their avatar. Person A talked about how the internet gave him the ability to feel a part of different communities while Person B used vlogs to recreate the feeling of having a real human accompany her. For Person C, the internet was an escape to seek a culture different from that of the physical surroundings. Person D, while their goal was to shroud their online persona with mystery, it was in order to bring one closer to what he expresses in his music. Gen Z's penchant towards authenticity isn't held in a material object nor is it found in the aesthetic of a specific counterculture. Rather, the authenticity that Gen Z values is found in the social ability to find genuine connections with one another. Living in a world of information overload and the ability to communicate with anyone regardless of their geographic location means that Gen Z is able to search, join, and unite in their own communities of shared values and meaning.

"Dolce utopia" as coined by Maurizio Cattelan articulates the pursuit of many artists in constructing temporal spaces as a form of experimentation.¹⁴⁷ Today's Dolce utopia is a disembodied experience, existing online in those few fleeting moments of connection that our online communities provide us with. Duchamp had once said that it's the beholder who makes the picture,¹⁴⁸ but it seems as though the idea he sets forth is that dialogue could be the actual

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https://assets.ctfassets.net/inb32lme5009/5DF1qKVGIdmAu7X6btfGQt/44fdca09d7b630ee28f5951d54feed71/Into_Z_Future_Understanding_Gen_Z_The_Next_Generation_of_Super_Creatives_.pdf

¹⁴⁷ Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2010.

¹⁴⁸ Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2010.

origin of the image-making process. Artistic activity and creation at its base root strives to achieve a connection to oneself, the viewer, or the community. Vlogs also might fit under the umbrella of “Relational Aesthetics,” which uses human interactions and its social context as its medium. It conjures the serendipity of social interaction through the creation of a fixed situation. It’s like writing a loosely scripted scenario or giving extra stage directions to create new encounters from our already social world. Like the lasting encounters of lines on a paper creating an image, social encounters can be thought of having the same effect. Rirkrit Tiravanija invited people to eat Thai food. Lincoln Tobier had set up a radio station in art galleries and invited the public to a discussion that would then be broadcasted. Angus Fairhurst linked visitors from two different galleries to a single phone line.

But, as we’ve seen within the structure of the influencer economy, the social bond has ultimately turned into a commodity in a world which Sanja Grozdanić describes is “mediated by platforms that, in their most benign incarnation, profit from the information we freely offer, exploiting our emotional and cognitive abilities in an ever-escalating bid for our attention.”¹⁴⁹ Grozdanić was interviewing McKenzie Wark, theorist and author of the book *Capital is Dead*. In *Capital is Dead*, Wark explains how capitalism has mutated into a new reality where the ruling class no longer owns factories and physical objects, but is in control of information. It’s by collecting surplus information, she explains, that behavioral patterns can be predicted so that companies can control the flow of capital by fulfilling these future desires. She calls these people the “vectorialist class,” meaning that they control the vector of information.

¹⁴⁹ Grozdanić, Sanja. “How to Be A 21st Century Marxist with Hacker Theorist McKenzie Wark.” ssense, February 6, 2020. <https://www.ssense.com/en-us/editorial/culture/how-to-be-a-21st-century-marxist-with-hacker-theorist-mckenzie-wark>.

Not just our labor, not just our leisure—something else is being commodified here: our sociability, our common and ordinary life together, what you might even call our communism. It's a very banal and everyday one, it's our love of sharing our thoughts and feelings with each other and having connections to other people. But still, most people seem rather alarmed that their desire to share and be with each other, to reach out to friends, to pass on cat pictures, even their desire to have ferocious arguments with strangers, is making someone else very, very rich.¹⁵⁰

The surveillance of our social platforms who harvest our information to sell to other companies can explain why our advertisements are so specialized. Sometimes we'll even see advertisements that directly relate to conversations we've had in real life. Our phone and devices are watching us not only when we're online, but listening and tracking our lives even when we think we're logged out. In 2016, Google and Facebook made up 73 percent of all digital advertising in the United States.¹⁵¹ Youtube is a subsidiary of Google, and as I've mentioned before, all Youtubers depend on Google AdSense for monetization. With this in mind, we can be sure that Youtube is carefully analyzing which videos we choose and why.

I usually can't help but think that influencers as chess pieces who are taken advantage of by larger companies reaping the benefits from the social bonds they create with their viewers. Even politicians are using the advertising power of influencers.¹⁵² The democracy of the internet

¹⁵⁰ Wark, McKenzie. *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* London: Verso, 2019.

¹⁵¹ HINDMAN, MATTHEW. "Rethinking the Attention Economy." In *The Internet Trap: How the Digital Economy Builds Monopolies and Undermines Democracy*, 1-14. PRINCETON; OXFORD: Princeton University Press, 2018.

¹⁵² Enberg, Jasmine. "Politicians Are Turning to Influencers, Just Like Brands Are." eMarketer, February 26, 2020. <https://www.emarketer.com/content/politicians-are-turning-to-influencers-just-like-the-brands>.

and its cyber utopian potentials has been overridden by the big digital companies who capitalize off our basic impulse for connection. The internet is not a peer-to-peer network. Even Youtube, whose platform is frequently thought of as giving power to the amateurs and everyday people, is organized by an algorithm. The algorithm which I introduced at the beginning of my paper does more than just weed out offensive content for its advertisement companies. It is a “deep neural network”¹⁵³ that forms the architecture of not only how information is organized, but decides what information individuals will interact with. And while Youtube engineers have called it the “largest scale and most sophisticated industrial recommendation systems in existence,”¹⁵⁴ has been found guilty for promoting conspiracy theories and fake news.¹⁵⁵ Guillaume Chaslot is a computer programmer specializing in artificial intelligence who was an engineer at Google before building Youtube’s algorithm. He gave *The Guardian* an inside perspective of the algorithm's true objective. “YouTube is something that looks like reality, but it is distorted to make you spend more time online. The recommendation algorithm is not optimising for what is truthful, or balanced, or healthy for democracy,”¹⁵⁶ he says.

So while we may look to technology and applaud it for its revolutionary potential to keep us further connected, it’s important to recognize the limitations of algorithms that only contain us to its assumptions of who and what we want to interact with. Combined with an ever growing influencer economy that’s swaddled up and exploited by larger and more aggressive businesses,

¹⁵³ Covington, Paul, Jay Adams, and Emre Sargin. “Deep Neural Networks for YouTube Recommendations.” *Proceedings of the 10th ACM Conference on Recommender Systems*, July 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2959100.2959190>.

¹⁵⁴ Lewis, Paul. “Fiction Is Outperforming Reality’: How YouTube's Algorithm Distorts Truth.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, February 2, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/02/how-youtubes-algorithm-distorts-truth>.

¹⁵⁵ Lewis, Paul. “Fiction Is Outperforming Reality’: How YouTube's Algorithm Distorts Truth.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, February 2, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/02/how-youtubes-algorithm-distorts-truth>.

¹⁵⁶ Lewis, Paul. “Fiction Is Outperforming Reality’: How YouTube's Algorithm Distorts Truth.” *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, February 2, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2018/feb/02/how-youtubes-algorithm-distorts-truth>.

our digital ecosystem looks grim. It's like a game of snakes and ladders where users have to tiptoe around vicious, self interested players to make sure they're not being taken advantage of. The tricky part today lies in deciphering where one's intentions lie, especially when everything is camouflaged under the guise of incessant pleas for authenticity and relatability.

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